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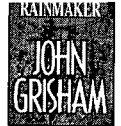
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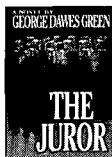
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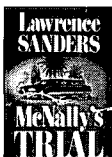
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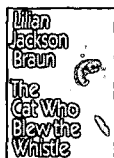


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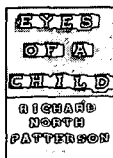
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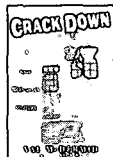
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AUGUST 1995

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Malicious mischief
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PRINCIPLES OF ACCOUNTS

by Ian Rankin

It began as a hobby.

But then quite quickly the hobby became a career, and now he was a professional, taking a professional's care in the details of his craft. True, something had been lost; that was the trouble when a hobby became mere business. But at least he had the consolation of knowing that business was good. He saw himself as a value assessor. He assessed the value of an item, then collected on it, the money being insurance against loss. He had always been good at accounts, economics, business studies. He loved those subjects at school, hardly believing the sheer thrill of balancing books. The sums *always came out the same*, either

side of the thick vertical centre line. He used similar skills now when assessing each item: value of item balanced against risk involved.

Not that he ever damaged an item. It hadn't been necessary so far. But he was very good at pretending he would damage them. He could reduce tough fathers to pleas and weeping, and all via the telephone. The telephone was his friend—not any one particular telephone, but *all* phones, spread across the country in a matrix of elegantly anonymous paybooths. He made a point of spending not more than a minute in each phone box he used, timing each call. Single-mindedness was his real strength. Determination of purpose. The sixty-second calls had become his trademark. People knew when they were dealing with the Minute Man.

The media, who had coined the nickname, they too were his friends, stirring up fear, building him into a figure of terror. He rewarded them with increased circulation and viewing figures, while the police held increasingly ineffectual press conferences requesting information, playing tapes they'd made of his voices.

He used several voices, none his own. He hadn't spoken more than six words to any of his four young items, and even then had disguised his voice. Actually, he'd used more than six words with the last one, the one whose value now sat before him on the table. She had been a talker, a good talker, too. She'd recited stories and anecdotes—even when she couldn't be sure he was there. Occasionally he'd asked a question, something to help him get the story straight in his mind. She had given him her stories, and now her father had given him all this money.

Tonight, with an open bottle of cheapish Australian Chardonnay on the floor beside his chair, with his belly full from the

Ian Rankin's previous stories for *EQMM* (January, April, and October of 1993) employed John Rebus, the Scottish police inspector who features in his novels. Rebus novels are now being translated into Japanese and Italian, and one book is under option to the BBC. As successful as he has been with Inspector Rebus, Mr. Rankin still produces nonseries work, and his new story, set in England, is a fine example.†

meal he'd eaten at the Indian on the High Street, tonight was for reflection. At the top of the hour, he hit the remote to catch the Channel 4 news and saw with some pride that he was the main story. Or rather, the item was.

She blinked a lot. Nervousness, or perhaps the glare of the lights and flashguns. Her hair had been washed, but she wore no makeup, and her face looked pale. She had lost a little weight, her own fault for not eating everything he'd given her.

She'd worked out pretty quickly—they usually did—that the food was laced with tranqs, crushed-up sleeping pills. But like the others, she'd given in and eaten anyway. Sensible, when the only other alternative was force-feeding by rubber tube and plastic funnel.

She stayed on screen only half a minute, refusing to answer the yelled questions. Now she was replaced by a policeman. A caption appeared along the bottom of the screen: Ch. Supt. Thomas Lancaster. Ah yes, Tom Lancaster. He raised his glass, toasting his adversary, even though the police's inefficiency was a constant source of irritation to him.

"... and I must praise Miss Webster's calm and her bravery," Lancaster was saying. "After her release, she was able to help us compile this composite photograph of her kidnapper."

He put down his glass. The photo was onscreen now.

"The man we're looking for is five feet seven or eight, stocky, with blue eyes. As you can see, he has a round face, full lips, and thick, slightly curly hair, either black or very dark brown."

He whooped. He got up and danced. She'd never set eyes on him! He never allowed his items the luxury. He looked at himself in the mirror. He was six feet tall, certainly not stocky. He had brown eyes, short, straight, light-brown hair. Full lips? No. Round face? No. She'd given the police a wholly fictitious account. Tomorrow the photo would be in every newspaper, pinned up outside every police station. This was better than he could ever have imagined. . . .

But why had she done it? What was she playing at? He didn't like puzzles, didn't like it when the accounts failed to balance at the bottom. He switched off the TV and put aside his wine. One thing was obvious: She didn't want him caught. Only two people could be certain her description was a fiction: the item, and the Minute Man. He was still deep in thought when ten

o'clock came round. He switched on the TV news again, and was thrown into fresh confusion.

"There has been an arrest tonight after the latest Minute-Man kidnap victim was released."

Sitting up, he kicked over the wine bottle. It poured out its contents unchecked.

"A man, believed to be a business acquaintance of Gillian Webster's father, has been taken to Castle Lane police station for questioning. We now go over live to Castle Lane, where Martin Brockman is waiting to speak to us. Martin, any more details?"

Now the reporter was on the screen, looking cold against a damp nighttime street, headlamps flashing past him. He wore a sheepskin coat and had one hand pressed to his ear, holding in place the earphone. He began to speak.

"All police will say is that a man is being questioned in connection with the kidnapping of Gillian Webster, who was released unharmed this morning. There's no word yet of whether or not the man will be asked to take part in an identity parade, but rumour has it that the man police are questioning is actually *known* to Miss Webster's father, the millionaire Duncan Webster, and that it was Mr. Webster himself who first noticed the resemblance between the photofit and the man police are currently questioning."

"Let's get this right, Martin, you're saying Mr. Webster *identified* his daughter's kidnapper?"

"I don't think we can go that far just yet, but . . ."

But he had switched off the television.

"What's your game, little Gillian?" he said quietly. "Your game . . . or your father's?" He felt dizzy, confused. There had to be a reason for all of this. The wine was thumping in his head.

"I hate puzzles!" he yelled at the blank TV screen. "I hate puzzles!"

In Castle Lane police station, Chief Superintendent Tom Lancaster was about to get some sleep. He'd phoned his wife to explain that he wouldn't be home. He kept a fresh suit, shirt, and tie in the office anyway, and now there was a camp bed there too, with an army-quality sleeping bag. Nothing to the comforts of home, but it would have to do. Tomorrow might be even busier than today. He was comforted to know that the press weren't going home either. Some had crawled off to hotels and

boardinghouses, but others were camping out in cars and vans outside the station.

Lancaster slipped off his clothes and into the chilled sleeping bag. He wriggled for a few seconds, getting warm, then reached to the floor, where several bulging files lay. The transcript of Gillian Webster's conversations with the Minute Man had been typed up. He read through them again. It was one-way traffic. The Minute Man had said only a couple of dozen words, mostly in the form of abrupt questions.

His second victim, Elaine Chatham, had managed a longer utterance from him. She'd asked if she could have a book of crosswords to pass the time. She'd kept on asking until she'd forced from him a gruff confession (in his Geordie accent this time). Three important little words. Tom Lancaster whispered them to himself.

"I hate puzzles."

Then, smiling, he reached for the anglepoise and turned off the light.

It was nearly midday when Mrs. Angelo heard the bell tinkling at the front desk.

"Coming!" she called, trying to sound calm. Her husband Tony should have been helping her, but he had the flu and was upstairs asleep. It was his third bout of flu this year; he never wanted the doctor called in. The man standing at the desk carried a sports holdall and a sheaf of the morning papers. He wore a new-smelling sheepskin jacket and a harassed grin.

"I'd like a room, please," he announced.

"Just the one night, is it?"

"Well . . ."

"You're a journalist," Mrs. Angelo stated. "You're reporting on that kidnapping, and you don't know how long you'll need the room. Am I right?"

"You could write our astrology column."

She checked the rack of room keys on the wall. "Number 6 has a wash basin, or there's number 11, but it doesn't. Those are the only two I've got." She turned to him. "We're busy all of a sudden."

"You've already got reporters staying?"

"One's been here all the way through, the others moved in yesterday. And I've a very nice cameraman and soundman from the BBC, only they complain because *their* reporter is in some

posh hotel. I told them, posh just means expensive. Number six or number eleven?"

"Six, please."

"Only the best, eh? I dare say you're on expenses." She unhooked the key, then swivelled the register around for him to sign. "So which paper are you from?"

He didn't look up from his writing. "I'm freelance. A few magazines are interested, so I thought I'd . . . you know."

She swivelled the register back towards her. "Well, Mr. Beattie, let's hope you get your story, eh?"

"Yes," he agreed, taking the key from her warm, damp fingers. "Let's hope."

He threw the papers onto the floor beside the single bed. The mattress was softer than he liked, but the room was clean and fresh. It worried him that there were other reporters here. He didn't want them asking him questions. He unzipped the holdall, taking his Gillian Webster case notes from it. Included in the file was a packet of black and white photographs he'd taken during the weeks leading up to the snatch. He looked through them again.

The Websters lived in a large detached house set in a few acres of rambling grounds. He'd gone out there one Sunday with his camera. He'd been out that way several times before in his car, stopping once with engine trouble near the house. About a hundred yards from the house there was a clump of bushes and saplings, big enough for him to hide in. On that particular Sunday, he'd taken his very best zoom lenses for the Canon camera. Then he went strolling with camera and binoculars and a bird identification book.

What he hadn't expected was that Gillian Webster would not be home. He also had not expected the Websters to be entertaining. They'd invited a dozen or so people for late-afternoon drinks. He was lucky the weather was cool: Nobody seemed inclined to wander down into the garden towards where he was hiding. But a verandah ran the length of the back of the house, and some of the guests wandered out onto it; so, occasionally, did the host and hostess. He shot off a single roll of film, concentrating on Webster and his wife. She was younger than her husband by at least ten years; even so, she was showing her age. The skin

sagged from her face and neck, and her short blonde hair looked brittle.

Lying on the bed, he paused at one particular photograph. A man had been standing alone on the verandah, then had been joined by Mrs. Webster. It looked as though she were greeting the man. They were kissing. The man, who was holding a champagne flute, held Mrs. Webster's arm with his free hand, drawing her towards him. The kiss was no perfunctory peck. Their lips met, were maybe even parted. The kiss had seemed to last quite a while. He searched through the other photos for a better one of the man. Yes, here he was with Mr. Webster and another guest. They looked serious, as though discussing business. The man was caught face-on. He was shorter than Webster, heavily-built, with dark wavy hair just covering his ears. Early on in the party, he had loosened his tie and his shirt collar. Did he merely look serious in this photo, or did he look worried? There were dark bags under his eyes . . .

He lifted a newspaper and stared at the photofit police had issued, the one made up from Gillian Webster's description. It was the guest from the party. He was sure of that.

The local radio station had set up a van in the police station car park, with a tall antenna flexing from its roof. It looked as though the journalists had been made to move into the car park. Probably their cars had been holding up traffic in Castle Lane. As he arrived, they were milling around, drinking beakers of tea, talking into portable phones, reading from sheets of paper.

He looked around. One young man stood apart from the others. He looked shy and uncomfortable, and was wearing cheap clothes. There were spots around his mouth and on his neck, and he kept pushing slippery glasses back up his nose as he read from his own sheets of paper, glancing up from time to time to see what the other journalists were doing.

He was perfect.

"Local are you, chief?"

The young man looked up in surprise at the man with the southeast accent, the man wearing the expensive jacket.

"Sorry?"

"You look like the local press."

The young man twitched. "I'm from the *Post*."

"Thought so." The sheets of paper were plucked from the young man's hands. They detailed the morning's media briefing. There would be a conference at three o'clock, and another at seven. Otherwise, the only news was that the man they'd been questioning was to be held for another twenty-four hours.

"What do you think, chief?" The young man looked dazed. "Come on, you can tell Uncle Des."

"There's not much to think."

He wrinkled his nose, folding the press release and shoving it into the young man's anorak pocket. "Don't give me that. That's the *official* line, but this is between you and me. You're *local*, my son, you've got the edge on all of us." He nodded towards the scattering of journalists, none of whom was taking any notice of this conversation.

"Who are you?"

"I thought I told you, Des Beattie."

"Beattie?"

"How long you been in this game, son?" He shook his head sadly. "The Ripper case, I covered it for the *Telegraph*. Freelance now, of course. I can pick and choose my crime stories. A *certain magazine* has asked me to see if there's an angle in all this." He looked the young man up and down. "You might be in for half the byline. Could be your ticket out of here, chief. We all had to start somewhere."

"Stefan's my name, Stefan Duniec."

"Pleased to meet you, Stefan." They shook hands. "What's that, Russian is it?"

"Polish."

"Well, I'm Des Beattie and I'm from Walthamstow. Only I live in Docklands now." He winked. "Handy for the newspaper offices. So what've you got?"

"Well . . ." Duniec looked around. "It's not really *my* idea . . ." Beattie shrugged this aside. There was no copyright on news. "But I've heard that someone's got a name."

"For the sod they're questioning?" Duniec nodded. Beattie seemed thoughtful. "Maybe it'll tie in with my own ideas. What's the name, Stefan?"

"Bernard Cooke."

Beattie nodded slowly. "Bernie Cooke. The businessman, right?"

Now Duniec nodded. "Does it tie in?"

Beattie puckered his mouth. "Might well do. I need to check a few facts first."

"I could help." The kid was keen all right. He didn't want to wear that anorak forever. Beattie patted his shoulder.

"Stick around here, Stefan. Keep your ears open. I'll go make a couple of calls." Duniec glanced down at the large pockets of Beattie's sheepskin. Beattie grinned. "We can't all afford cell phones. Meantime . . ." He nodded towards the other reporters. "You might try writing this up. You know, something wry about the long wait. Eight hundred words, who knows, there's always a market for filler. The Sundays are nothing but filler these days."

"Eight hundred?"

Beattie nodded, then reconsidered. "Seven-fifty," he said, heading out of the car park.

A small engineering works on a purpose-built estate.

A helpful sign at the site entrance told him he was looking for Unit 32, Cooke Engineering Ltd. He drove his rented Fiesta slowly through the narrow winding roads, giving way to lorries and delivery vans. Half a dozen cars were parked outside Unit 32 in tightly marked bays. The building was grey corrugated steel, shared by two companies. Unit 31 manufactured frozen foods. Driving past it, he sized up Unit 32. There was a door which would lead to the reception area or offices, and a loading-bay door near it. Both were closed. Parked in the loading bay was a sporty Ford Sierra, one of the custom jobs. In the driver's seat, a man was talking on a car phone. In the back seat were two more large pasty-faced men. They looked like reporters. Well, if a dolt like Duniec knew about Cooke, the professionals would know too. And though Cooke himself wasn't here, though he was sweating and dog-tired in one of Castle Lane's interview rooms, a team had been sent to stake the place out.

He gnawed at his bottom lip, and decided to take a calculated risk. He drove to the next lot of units, parked, and walked back towards Cooke Engineering. The door he was approaching, having ignored the carfull of staring eyes, had OFFICE printed on it. He knocked and entered, closing the door behind him. He'd expected noise: After all, only a partition wall separated this part of the unit from the actual production line. But there was silence, punctuated by the slow clack of fingers on a word processor keyboard.

"Can I help you?" She sat behind a desk, but also behind huge red-rimmed spectacles, which magnified her already large eyes. Her tone was hardly welcoming.

"Mr. Cooke?" he said nervously. "Wondered if I could have a—"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, well I . . ."

"Are you a reporter?" She examined him, hunched over as he was, shuffling and twitching and awkward. "You don't look like one." She sighed. "No cold calling, reps by appointment only. I take it you *are* a rep?"

"Well, as it happens I—"

"Sorry," she said, seeming to take pity on this particularly pitiful example of an unlovely breed. "Mr. Cooke's not here anyway."

He looked around. "Place looks dead."

"Dead about sums it up."

"Business bad?"

"Let's just say you shouldn't look for too many orders."

"Ah . . ." He seemed to think of something. "But the cars outside . . . ?"

"We let the guys from the frozen-food place park their excess cars there."

"Oh dear." He nodded towards where he assumed the production line would be, just through the wall. "Then you're not . . . ?"

"We're not producing. So unless you're selling jobs in the light engineering sector, I shouldn't bother."

He smiled. "But you're still here."

"Only till the weekend. No pay by Friday, I'm off." She went back to her typing, her fingers hammering the keys.

He turned to leave, his back and shoulders more hunched than ever. Then he stopped and half-turned. "What made you think I was a reporter?"

"You'll read about it."

Only after he'd gone did she pause in her work. She'd seen them all in her time, all the types of rep you could imagine. But she'd never come across one who didn't even bother to bring samples with him . . .

Across from the industrial estate was a recently built pub, doubtless put there by a canny brewing concern who knew there would be plenty of clients from an estate of eighty-odd units.

"That was the idea anyway," the barman admitted, pouring a pint of beer, "before times got hard. What gets me is that none of these *financial projections*—" he said the words with distaste "—ever *projected* hard times ahead. And let me tell you, there's no money-back guarantee with these things." He had handed over the drink, received a five-pound note, and now pressed a key on the till.

"Accountants aren't all bad," said the customer.

As the barman handed over the change, the customer asked a question.

"Does a man called Bernard Cooke drink in here?"

There was a snort from further down the bar, where a man on a stool was doing the crossword in the local paper.

"Why do you ask?" asked the barman.

"I was supposed to be seeing him today. Drove all the way down from bloody Lancaster." The barman didn't seem about to doubt his northwest accent. "Only there's no bugger about except some right rough types in a car parked outside."

"Reporters," said the crossword solver.

"Oh aye?"

"You won't be seeing Cooke for a while." The crossword solver tipped back the dregs of a half-pint.

"We don't know that," snapped the barman. "Don't go jumping to bloody conclusions, Arthur."

Arthur merely shrugged in compliance, staring down at his paper.

"He's in trouble, is he?" asked the traveller.

"Maybe."

"Bang goes my bloody contract."

"You're lucky, then," said Arthur.

"How do you mean?" He nodded towards the empty glass. "Get you another?"

"Thanks, I will."

The barman refilled the glass, but wouldn't take one himself. Arthur sipped and swallowed. "I mean," he said at last, "Bernie's been in trouble for yonks, money trouble. Chances are, if you were buying from him, you wouldn't have got what you ordered, and if you were selling, you wouldn't have seen the money."

"Thanks for the tip."

"I've known for months he was in trouble. Used to be, he'd nip in here Friday lunchtime for something to eat and a couple of

brandies. Then it got to be twice a week and four brandies, and three times a week and six. Somebody drinks like that, it's not because they're flush, it's that they're worried."

"I know what you mean."

"All I know," chipped in the barman, "is that he always paid ... and that's more than some."

Arthur winked at Beattie. "That's a dig at me."

Beattie finished his drink and eased himself off the barstool.

"Back to Lancaster?"

He shook his head. "Couple more calls first."

After he'd gone, the bar was silent a few moments, then Arthur cleared his throat.

"What do you think?"

"Well," said the barman, "he wasn't a reporter. I'm not even sure he's in business."

"How do you make that out?"

"No expense account—didn't ask for a receipt for the drinks."

"Maybe he doesn't need receipts, Sherlock."

"Maybe." The barman lifted away the empty glass and washed it, placing it on the rack to dry. Then he wiped the bartop where the man had been sitting, and put down a fresh beer mat. Now there was no sign anyone had ever been there.

"Just be a second," the barman told Arthur. Then he disappeared into the alcove where the telephone was kept.

At three-forty, the journalists slouched out of the press room carrying the latest news release. They were talkative, if they weren't too busy drawing in cigarette smoke. Some were making calls on their telephones, or going off to their cars to make calls. They squeezed from the police station's double doors and fanned out across the car park. A camera unit had been readied for the TV reporter called Martin Brockman, who was now checking his script while a makeup girl tried to get his hair to stop flying into a vertical peak every time a gust blew.

Stefan Duniec walked slowly across the car park, not heading towards his car—he did not have a car—but just keeping moving, so he looked as busy and important as the other reporters. He was staring down at his notebook and didn't notice the figure blocking his way until he'd practically bumped into it.

"Hello, Mr. Beattie, you missed the conference."

"Couldn't be helped, Stef. Anything to report?"

"I got you a copy of the press release."

"Good lad." Beattie started to read from the two stapled sheets. Gillian Webster, he read, had now given a description of the room she'd been kept in during her "ten-day ordeal." Not so much a room, more a cupboard, kept in darkness. She could hear distant traffic, as though heavy lorries were passing outside. But she was tied up, mouth taped shut, and couldn't cry out.

Beattie read it again. Well, it was true he'd kept her mouth taped shut occasionally, but everything else was a fabrication, another false account.

"Interesting," he said. "Are they still questioning Cooke?" Duniec nodded. "And I suppose they'll be giving his factory the once-over?"

"How do you mean?"

"Stands to reason, Stef. This cupboard could be in Cooke's factory. I've just come from there. He's been laying off staff. The only person left is a secretary, and I doubt she goes anywhere near the shop floor—she might get her hands mucky." He glanced again at the paper. "Lorries going past . . . sounds just like an industrial estate."

"I suppose it does," Duniec said quietly.

"And if he's been laying off men, what does that tell you?"

"His company's in trouble."

"Dead right. So tell me, young Stef, is Cooke wealthy or skint?"

"Skint, I suppose."

"And desperate."

"So he kidnaps someone he knows. . . . How could he hope to get away with it?"

"All we know is that he knew the parents; we don't know Gillian knew him."

"But he let her see him," Duniec protested. "He must've known she'd give a description—that her father would see it. . . ."

Beattie nodded. Precisely. That was just one of the flaws. Would Cooke really have kept her in his factory, with someone else on the premises all day? How could he feed Gillian without the secretary becoming suspicious? Gillian's story was badly flawed. But Beattie wondered if the police would see that. *He* could see what Gillian Webster was doing, and how she was doing it. He just couldn't account for the why. But he had an idea now, a good idea. He only needed to study the photographs again.

Meantime, Stefan had obviously been considering all the flaws too.

"Like you say, he must have been desperate."

"He was desperate all right, he just wasn't very bright." He tapped Duniec's shoulder with the rolled-up press release. "I'll see you later." He winked. "Remember the byline."

"And the seven-fifty words!" Duniec called after him. "I've already made a start!"

Without looking back, Beattie gave a raised thumbs-up. Duniec watched till he was out of sight, then turned back towards the reporters' cars. Three men were in a huddle next to a red Porsche.

"Excuse me," he said, interrupting them. One man, the one with a proprietorial hand resting on the Porsche's roof, spoke for all of them.

"What is it?"

"You're Terry Greig, aren't you?"

Greig puffed out his chest. Of course he was Terry Greig, king of the tabloid newsroom, scourge of copy-takers. And here was another tyro looking to make his acquaintance.

"What can I do for you, lad?"

Duniec didn't like that "lad," but like Beattie's "Stef" he let it lie. "Did you see that man I was talking to?" he asked instead. "In the sheepskin jacket?"

Greig nodded. Little escaped him. "I saw him earlier," he confirmed.

"Right," said Duniec. "And have you seen him before? I mean, do you know who he is?"

"Don't know him from Adam. Football manager, is he? Third Division? They're the only buggers would wear a coat like that."

"Except for Brockman," added one of the other reporters.

"Except for old Brockie," Greig agreed. Then they all laughed, all except Stefan Duniec. When the laughter had died and they were waiting for him to leave, he turned his gaze once more to Greig.

"He wrote up the Ripper case for the *Telegraph*."

"No he didn't, not unless he meant the *Belfast Telegraph*." They all laughed again. Even Duniec's lips were bent slightly in what might have passed for a smile.

"What's it all about, lad?" asked Greig.

"Could we step inside the station, sir?" Duniec said. To anyone standing within earshot, it didn't sound much like a question. . . .

The man who called himself Des Beattie was packing his bag.

He tore the ring-pull from another can of McEwan's and gulped from the can. The photographs were lying on the bed. He paused in his packing and studied the photos again. Cooke with Duncan Webster. Cooke with Mrs. Webster. Cooke looking *very* comfortable with Mrs. Webster. Cooke looking *extremely* uncomfortable with Duncan Webster, looking like maybe he owed the man money, money he couldn't hope to repay. But that wasn't Cooke's problem. No, Cooke's problem was the wife. Look at the two of them: touching, kissing. With Mr. Webster, Cooke looked more like a business acquaintance than anything; but with Mrs. Webster he looked like a very close friend indeed.

Whether Webster knew or not, he couldn't tell. But the daughter had known. Gillian Webster had found out about Cooke and her mother, about their affair. Christ, and she was Daddy's little daughter, wasn't she? When she'd spoken to him of her home life, hoping to ingratiate herself, hoping he wouldn't harm someone he knew as a *real person* rather than an item (yes, she'd been clever all right), when she had done this, she had spoken always of her father first, her mother second. Daddy, Daddy, Daddy: It had always been Daddy. While Mother had remained just that: "Mother."

All those hours she'd been alone, those hours with little to do but struggle against her bonds, little to think about but . . . but how to turn this little adventure to her own advantage. She would set up Bernard Cooke. She must have known his company was in trouble, giving him the motive. Who would suspect she'd lie about something like this? No one, no one would know excepting three people: Cooke himself, the mother, and the real kidnapper. Cooke would protest his innocence, but it was his word against Gillian's. Mrs. Webster . . . what could *she* say without revealing the extent of her ties to Cooke? And as for the kidnapper . . . well, was he going to come forward to help Cooke? Of course not!

It was true, wasn't it? He wasn't going to do anything. He was going to leave this town and never return. With Cooke inside, the heat would be off, the police would stop checking airports and seaports. Yes, a foreign holiday, somewhere sunny and dry, not like this cold miserable island where he worked. He could stop by a travel agent's tomorrow. On the plane out, he'd order champagne and drink to poor Bernard Cooke.

That was that.

He opened another can and picked up the photo, the one of Cooke and Mrs. Webster kissing. The more he looked at it, the more he saw that he could be wrong. What if it *was* just a friendly kiss? These types, types like Mrs. Webster, they could get overfamiliar. What if it had nothing to do with the mother? What if . . . what if it had to do with *Gillian* instead? She'd told him, "Daddy doesn't like it when I bring home older men." Could there have been something between Gillian and Bernard Cooke? Maybe he'd broken it off and she was out for his blood. . . .

Wait, think a bit. If Cooke was single, it wouldn't work. It only worked if he was married and had to hide the relationship. His head began spinning, and he tried to stand up. How could he be sure? How could he be sure that Cooke and Mrs. Webster or Cooke and Gillian had been an item?

He caught that word "item" and smiled. If they'd been an item, people would have seen them together, somewhere they felt safe from Mr. Webster. Maybe that was why Cooke started using the pub across from the estate more often; nothing to do with his financial troubles. It should be easy enough to check. He'd go there now, on his way out of town. He thought of Stefan Duniec. Stefan, who probably wasn't fit to report on a flower show, never mind a police inquiry. There were some real thick bastards in the world, when you thought about it.

Jesus, weren't there just.

It was five o'clock when he walked into the bar. As he'd hoped, the shift had changed. The barman was new. What's more, Arthur had moved on. Good: They'd have thought it more than a little off, the Lancastrian returning to ask questions about Cooke and some woman.

The beer he'd drunk in his room had given him a taste, so he ordered a double Armagnac with a half of lager to chase it down. Fuel for the long drive ahead. The bar was medium-busy with workers on their way home from the estate. He sat on the same stool as earlier, and made a show of checking his watch and keeping an eye on the door.

"Waiting on someone?" the new barman dutifully asked.

"Bernard Cooke. I thought we arranged to meet at five."

The barman tried the name. "Don't think I know him."

"He's a lunchtime regular."

"I never do lunchtime."

He nodded miserably and finished the Armagnac. It burned him all the way down. One last time then: "He usually has a woman with him, a bit of posh."

The barman shrugged and went back to wiping glasses.

"Thanks anyway." He finished the lager and had another idea. It was a bit late, but worth a try. As he pushed open the door to the outside world, he met resistance. It was Arthur, coming in. Arthur looked surprised. Beattie switched to a northwest accent.

"Hello, Arthur."

"Thought you were off to the wide blue yonder."

"Just heading back now. I've been hearing Cooke has a fancy piece." He winked. "That's an expensive hobby, no wonder he's gone broke."

Arthur just stared, as though listening to a ghost. There was almost . . . it wasn't shock, it was more like *fear* in his eyes.

Beattie persisted. "Nice looker, by the sound of her."

"Eh?"

"They used to come in here."

"Did they?"

Was the man pissed? Maybe those crosswords had addled his brain. Beattie felt good and mellow.

"Never mind," he said. "See you around."

Arthur seemed to perk up. "Oh, right you are. Take care now."

"I will, Arthur, I will."

The secretary, having faithfully placed a dustcover over the computer, was putting on her coat when he arrived. She looked daggers at him, and he raised his hands in surrender.

"I'll only take a minute," he said. He hadn't really expected her to still be here. How much paperwork could an empty factory produce? The reporters had vanished from outside, along with most of the cars on the estate.

"You're persistent," she said. "He's not here."

"It was you I wanted to speak to."

"Oh?"

He stepped forward and produced the photo from his pocket, the one of Cooke and Mrs. Webster kissing.

"Is your boss married?" he asked.

She smiled sourly. "I knew you weren't a rep."

"Did I say I was? So what's the answer? A simple yes or no."

"What business is it of yours?"

He gave a fume-y sigh. "I can find out. It's not difficult."

"Off you go then and find out."

"Did you know he was having an affair?"

"It's only an affair if the person's married."

"Oh? So Cooke's a bachelor then?"

"That's not what I said."

"Mrs. Webster's married though." He was seeking a reaction, any reaction. "Her daughter's single."

"Get out." Her voice was colder than the lager he'd just consumed.

"Let me guess," he persisted. "You had the hots for him yourself, maybe he was stringing you along. . . ."

She picked up the receiver.

"All right, I'm going." He put the photo back in his pocket. "But remember, you don't owe him anything. It's him that owes you. Just give me a yes or no: Is he married?"

She started punching telephone buttons, so he left. She was breathing hard, but didn't let it show. She stared at the door, willing it to stay closed. Then she was connected. "Police?" she said. "I want to speak to Chief Superintendent Lancaster. . . ."

Outside, he sat in his car, thinking about the man called Arthur, the secretary, and Stefan Duniec. Then he got out again and started looking for another car. Any car would do, so long as it had a car phone.

Lancaster put down the receiver and looked towards the two people sitting across the desk from him.

"That was your secretary, Mr. Cooke." Bernard Cooke nodded: He'd gathered as much already. "Our man has just turned up again, asking if you're married and implying you've been having an affair with Mrs. Webster." He looked at the young woman next to Cooke. "Or even with you, Gillian."

Gillian Webster snorted. Lancaster was smiling.

"Looks like it's worked," he said. *I hate puzzles.* Those three words had set the whole game in motion. And the game was about to end: right result, right team. "He had a photo with him," he went on, turning back to Bernard Cooke. "You and Gillian's mother on the veranda at her home."

"That Sunday drinks party," Cooke decided.

"The Minute Man was watching."

"He thinks Cora and I are lovers?"

"He's putting two and two together and making five, luckily

for us. If that photo had just shown the two of you talking, he might not have suspected anything."

"Whereas as it is . . ."

"He thinks he knows why Gillian's set you up. It couldn't have worked out better."

Gillian Webster turned to Cooke. "Kissing my mother on the veranda?"

Cooke tried a nervous smile. Lancaster shifted in his chair. He was nervous for all sorts of reasons. The Minute Man *had* to solve puzzles, even if that meant conjuring an answer out of the thinnest stuff. Lancaster had invented a conundrum, hoping his adversary would be irritated by it . . . and drawn towards it. Someone even suggested the Minute Man might pose as a reporter—a suitable disguise for showing interest in the case. . . .

There was a knock at the door, and a young man came in. Lancaster introduced him.

"I don't think either of you has met Detective Constable Duniec." Duniec nodded a greeting, but Gillian's mind was on the idea of Cooke and her mother. "Well, Stefan?" Lancaster asked.

The look on Duniec's face was bad news.

"He paid his bill and left over an hour ago."

Lancaster nodded. "He's been back to the Forester's, a regular called Arthur just phoned to tell me. And he paid another visit to the factory."

"We know his car, sir, red Fiesta, there's a call out for it."

"All exit roads are covered, aren't they?"

Duniec nodded.

"Then all we can do is wait."

Lancaster tried to look relaxed. Bernard Cooke had been doubtful of the plan at first, but as a friend of Gillian's he'd gone along with it. After all, partly it had been her idea. She was looking pale again. She'd been ordered to rest by the doctors, but had insisted on sticking around. The phone rang again. Lancaster snatched the call.

"Red Fiesta," he said afterwards. "Sighted heading for Lower Traherne." He fixed his eyes on Gillian. "Looks like he's heading out to your home." Then he turned to Duniec. "Get onto it, Stefan." Duniec nodded and left the room.

This eventuality, too, had been covered. The Websters were in a local hotel, under plainclothes protection. A driver and unmarked car were waiting outside to take Gillian back there. The Minute Man was driving into a trap.

The phone rang yet again, and Lancaster picked it up, glad of something to do. He listened for a moment, a muscle going rigid in his jaw. When he spoke, it was in a dry voice. "Put him through, will you? And try to get a trace." He then pushed a button on the telephone and replaced the receiver. A small integral speaker crackled into life. A female voice said, "You're through, caller." Lancaster swallowed and spoke.

"Hello?"

"Superintendent Lancaster?"

"Speaking."

Lancaster watched Gillian. She was staring at the telephone. What little colour she had vanished from her face.

"Don't bother with a trace, Tom. I won't be on long, you know that."

"We get a dozen cranks a day saying they're the Minute Man."

"You know who I am, Tom."

"Why are you phoning?"

"Because you've got the wrong man."

Lancaster looked to Gillian and Cooke. She looked ready to leap from her seat, while Cooke seemed pinned against the back of his as if by G-force.

"Have we?"

"Yes. She's set him up."

"Who has?"

"The girl."

"Why would she do that?"

"He's been having an affair with her mother. She wants revenge."

Lancaster forced a laugh. "How can you possibly know that?"

"I know. I know all of it now."

The line went dead.

"Christ," Cooke said. Lancaster checked with the switchboard, but the Minute Man hadn't been on long enough to give them a chance. In fact, he'd been on the line for scarcely a minute. . . .

Lancaster got to his feet. "I wonder if he still plans to visit Lower Traherne? One way to find out. . . ."

"I'm coming too," said Cooke, rising shakily to his feet. Gillian was still staring at the telephone. Neither man needed confirmation that she had recognised the voice. When Lancaster touched her shoulder she flinched.

"Come on, Gillian," he said. "Let's get you back to the hotel."

They opened the back door of the car for her and she got in. The engine was running and the car moved off at once, through the car park, past the usual ruck of reporters and cameras, and out of the iron gates of Castle Lane police station. She didn't want to go to the hotel, not really. She wanted to go home, to Lower Traherne. But she doubted the police driver could be persuaded to take her there. She noticed a walkie talkie on the floor by his feet. Or maybe it was a portable phone. Whatever happened at the house, she'd hear of it. He was looking at her in the rearview mirror. When she looked back, he gave her a reassuring smile. Then she noticed they'd passed the regular turning.

"We should have gone left there."

He was still smiling. The car was building up speed. Gillian felt a lump swell in her throat, the fear nearly choking her.

"I know it all now," he said quietly. "The way Lancaster spoke, that confirmed it. Oh yes, that balanced both sides of the ledger quite nicely."

She swallowed, shifting the blockage. "Where's the driver?"

"I'm the driver."

"The policeman."

"You think he's in the boot?" He shook his head. "I told him his chief wanted him in the press room."

She was relaxing a little. His voice was calm. It had been calm all the time she'd been his captive. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Lower Traherne."

"What?"

"I'm taking you home, Gillian."

"But why?"

He shrugged. "Just to show them I can."

She thought for a moment. While she was thinking, he spoke again.

"It was good, very good, nearly had me fooled. Except for one scared bloke in a pub . . ."

She felt the words tumble from her mouth, like someone else was speaking. "They've got the exit roads covered, and there are police at the house, inside and outside. You'll never—"

"It's all right, Gillian. You'll see, both sides will balance."

"What do you mean, balance?"

So for the rest of the journey, the Minute Man tried to explain to her his own particular theories of the principles of accounts. ●

THE NINE-O'CLOCK GUN

by Edward D. Hoch

Rand flew from London to Vancouver first-class, aboard a regularly scheduled 747 passenger aircraft, the rear portion of which had been partitioned off to carry large cargo. It was not until they were somewhere over the North Atlantic that his seat-mate confided that the plane's main cargo consisted of a thoroughbred race horse on its way to Japan for breeding purposes. The man was an Indian named Avtar Singh and he owned the horse.

"I never allow him to travel without me," he confided to Rand. "Especially now. He has a cracked right foreleg and needs a special harness to keep some of the weight off it. We're stopping over for a few nights in Vancouver rather than make the entire flight in one trip."

"I hope he recovers well."

The Indian nodded. "He will not race again, but he is still a valuable animal. Vancouver is a lovely city. Are you coming for business or pleasure?"

"A bit of both," he answered vaguely. "I hope to take a tour."

Rand had never been able to sleep on long plane flights, and the film being shown was an American comedy about cowboys. Chatting with Avtar Singh off and on during the flight did help pass the time. When they landed at Vancouver International Airport in the early afternoon, they left the plane and cleared customs together.

En route to the Seattle Bouchercon, your editor had the pleasure of dining with author Ed Hoch and his wife Pat at the hotel in which Rand's current adventure is set. Ever alert for possible story material, the author noticed a score of things about his surroundings that probably escaped most of the other guests' attention, and will slip by you too, if you're not as observant as Rand. . . . †

"It has been a pleasure," Singh said with a farewell handshake. "Now I must go to claim my horse."

A driver was waiting nearby, holding up a sign that read J. Rand. "That's me," Rand said. "Are you from Mr. Chant?"

"Correct, sir. Follow me, please."

He was dressed in a navy blue suit and he might have been wearing a shoulder holster. On the way to the hotel he told Rand his name was Fergesson and he'd worked for a time at the British Embassy in Hong Kong. "I understand a number of residents are moving here to Vancouver before the Chinese take over in ninety-seven," Rand said, making conversation.

"The well-off ones are. This harbor, with its islands and tall buildings, has the look of Hong Kong. Have you ever been there?"

"Just once, years back."

"Then you know there are Chinese who live on boats in the harbor, some rarely setting foot on land. They will not be coming here. The poor are always the last to leave, and then often in coffins."

"True enough," Rand agreed. He hadn't expected any deep thoughts on the brief journey into the city, and he fell silent during the remainder of the drive.

It wasn't until the hotel came into view on the northern fringe of the downtown area that Fergesson spoke again. "The Pan Pacific is one of the city's newest hotels. It's a conference center and also a docking place for Alaskan cruise ships in the summer. Mr. Chant has reserved a suite in your name."

"Thank you. I'll get out here."

"Need any help with your bag?"

"No, I can manage it."

Fergesson put a hand to his forehead in a sort of salute. "Have a good stay. We'll probably meet again."

"I'm sure we will."

Rand entered the hotel with his bag and took the escalator to the lobby and registration desk. From there he could look down on the entrance to the convention center where a line of booths presently promoted dental supplies.

"You're in a suite on the tenth floor," the room clerk told him. "Need any help with your bag, Doctor?"

"I don't think so, thanks." Rand smiled as he walked toward the elevators. When he returned home he'd have to tell Leila he'd been mistaken for a dentist attending the convention.

The elevators had a small carpet about the size of a welcome mat inset into the floor, with the word Tuesday incorporated in the design. A nice touch, he decided, for conventioners who couldn't remember what day it was. On the tenth floor, he'd just unlocked the door to his suite when the telephone started to ring. It was Oliver Chant.

"Fergesson tells me you had a good flight, Rand."

"Good enough. I'm a bit tired now, though."

"Suppose we meet for breakfast at your hotel. Nine o'clock?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Get some sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

"Are the others here?"

"They will be by morning. Tamara is flying in from Tokyo tonight."

"Good."

"Sleep well."

Rand hung up and quickly unpacked his bag. It was already after seven and jet lag was beginning to get to him. He decided on a light snack from room service and then, to bed. While he waited for it to be brought up, he considered phoning Leila at home to tell her he'd arrived safely. Then he remembered it would be three in the morning there and abandoned the idea.

He ate quickly and then showered, climbing between the sheets just before nine. He was drifting off into a contented sleep when he heard the rumble of an explosion. Unable to tell whether it was within the hotel or outside, he called the front desk.

"That was just the nine-o'clock gun," the room clerk informed him. "It's a small cannon in Stanley Park, across the water, that's fired every night at this time. It used to be a signal to sailing ships."

"Thanks. Just as long as I know what it is—"

"Have a good evening, sir."

Rand turned over and went to sleep.

Breakfast was served in a dining room at one end of the lobby, and as Rand entered just after nine the following morning he saw a tall, black-bearded man signaling to him. He'd met Oliver Chant only once before, at a London meeting of retired department heads and field agents. The man had quite a reputation at the time, having personally engineered the overthrow of a dictator who came to power in one of Britain's former Central

African colonies. That must have been—how long?—six or eight years back. He'd heard nothing from the man until a thick envelope arrived in the mail at his Reading home a few weeks earlier.

"Careful," Leila had warned. "It could be a letter bomb."

Rand grunted. There'd been some terrorist bombings lately but he hardly viewed himself as a likely target. "I've been retired too long for anyone to remember me," he said with some confidence. "Besides, with an envelope this small the detonator would probably be of the mousetrap variety. You simply squeeze the envelope between your fingers as you open it and the mousetrap can't spring shut— But see, it's only a letter and what appears to be a plane ticket."

The letter was from Oliver Chant, and the plane ticket was to Vancouver, Canada, for the following week. Chant mentioned the names of a half-dozen top people, all retired like Rand, who would be gathering in the city for an important meeting. "An important and profitable undertaking," the letter had read.

"You're flying a third of the way around the world for that?" Leila asked. But she did not press the point. She knew that Rand usually did what he wanted regardless of her advice.

"Next week's clear on our calendar," he told her, "and the man is paying my fare. If he's paying to fly the others in too, it's costing him a fair amount of money."

"Why Vancouver?" she wondered.

"It's halfway between London and Tokyo. At least two of the people are coming from there."

So he came on the following Monday night, flying first class and walking the aisles every couple of hours to keep his legs in shape. Now, at breakfast in the Vancouver hotel, he faced Oliver Chant across the table. "Do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

Chant gave a hoarse laugh. "I'm sorry for the intrigue, but then men in our line of work expect it, don't we?"

"I retired back in the seventies," Rand reminded him.

"Of course, though I hear stories from time to time indicating you still keep your hand in."

"It's a hand getting older by the day," Rand said. "Tell me about this meeting with the others."

"It's to be held at a house I'm renting out near Stanley Park. I'll send a car for you at one o'clock. We'll have a little drink and then get down to business."

"Has Tamara arrived yet?"

"I sent Fergusson to pick her up at the airport an hour ago. The Dutchman is already in Vancouver, and Sujo Imai may be on the plane with Tamara."

"I can hardly wait to hear what you have to tell us."

Oliver Chant smiled. "Be patient. All in due time."

They parted after breakfast and Rand walked out along the shoreline of Burrard Inlet, watching the activity in the harbor. Because he had time to kill, he rode the sea bus on the brief journey across the water to Lonsdale Quay and North Vancouver. It was a pleasant boat ride on a sunny day. Glancing around once as the sea bus docked at Lonsdale Quay, he thought he saw Chant's driver, Fergusson. He tried to catch another glimpse later, on land, but the man had disappeared from view.

It was warmer by noon, and Rand returned to his hotel room to trade his tweed jacket for one of lighter fabric. He phoned Leila at home to tell her he'd had a good flight and was meeting with Chant again that afternoon. "Be careful," she said, but then she'd told him that many times before.

Fergusson was downstairs with the car at one, holding the door open as Rand came out of the hotel. He wore the same blue suit, and Rand thought he detected the same slight bulge under the left arm. "How are you, Fergusson?"

"Fine, sir."

"I thought I saw you this morning, on the sea bus."

"You must have been mistaken."

"Did the people from Japan arrive on schedule?"

The driver hesitated and then nodded. "They're here."

He headed along Coal Harbour Road for a time and then turned up a driveway made almost invisible by a line of tall hedges. The house, when it came into view, could best be described as contemporary Northwest, two stories of weathered natural wood overlooking the wide inlet and the sprawling park across the water. "It belongs to a wealthy Chinese banker from Hong Kong," Fergusson explained without being asked. "Property is very expensive in the city right now, because there is so little of it. This house would bring a million Canadian dollars."

"No wonder Chant is only renting it."

The driver made an odd sound, something like a snort. "He would own it if he wanted it."

The car came to a stop and Rand jumped out before Fergesson could come around to open the door. He walked quickly up the steps to the front door, which was already being opened by a strikingly lovely woman wearing a white kimono with a richly brocaded bird on the left breast. "If it isn't Mr. Rand! Welcome to Vancouver."

"Hello, Tamara."

Tamara Cain was a woman of many nationalities. Her mother had been Sino-Japanese, her father English and German. Twenty years earlier, while still a teenager during South Vietnam's final tragic days, she'd been dubbed the "Mata Hari of the Mekong," though the source of this name was more the stuff of legend than fact. Rand had met her once in those days, and again from time to time over the years. She was not someone you ever forgot, and perhaps she was the real reason he'd flown to Vancouver. Her long black hair and pale skin, with the high cheekbones and ageless look of Asian women, had lingered in his thoughts over the years.

"I keep hearing stories about you," she told him. "You've spent some time in East Africa."

"Just a holiday."

She smiled knowingly. "Is this another holiday?"

"That remains to be seen. You probably know a great deal more than I do."

"Not nearly—" She was interrupted by the appearance of a stout middle-aged man wearing swimming trunks. He was drying his hair with a towel and had obviously just emerged from the water.

"I'm Hans van der Lin," he said, extending his damp hand toward Rand.

"The Dutchman. Your reputation is well known."

"That foolish name!"

"Have you been swimming in the harbor?" Rand asked.

The Dutchman shook his head. "There's a pool out back. The harbor on this side of the park is not good swimming. There are marine fueling stations and float plane terminals that sometimes pollute the water."

It suddenly occurred to Rand that Tamara Cain was probably wearing a bathing suit beneath her white kimono. He followed them out the back door to a terrace that surrounded a good-sized swimming pool. Oliver Chant was seated at a table with

an elderly Japanese gentleman whom Rand recognized as Sujo Imai. Both were fully clothed.

As with the Dutchman, Rand knew Sujo Imai mainly through his reputation. While still in his twenties, he'd been a Japanese cipher expert during World War II. Lately he'd published two books looking back on his wartime experiences. He bowed slightly as Rand was introduced and held out a feeble hand. "It is good to meet you before I die," he said in English. "Tamara was telling me about you on the flight over."

"Nothing bad, I hope."

"Do I have time for another swim?" Tamara asked their host.

Oliver Chant glanced at his watch. "We should get started. I was hoping for an American, one of those CIA Watergate people, but he canceled out. There are just the five of us, though that should be sufficient."

Sufficient for what? Rand wondered.

"Do we talk here?" the Dutchman asked, glancing at the sky where a float plane was coming in for a landing.

"Inside, where it's more private. I have a slide show for you, which requires a dim room, and I can get you a drink."

The Dutchman slipped on a pair of pants over his bathing trunks but left his bulging hairy chest on display. His skill, perfected during his younger days, had to do with the use of explosives on small wall safes such as those found in embassies and consulates. He'd worked mainly for the British and the Americans, though he was for hire to the highest bidder.

They filed into a study whose blinds were already drawn against the afternoon sun. Chant motioned them to a casual grouping of chairs and turned on the slide projector. A rectangle of white light hit the opposite wall, but before showing the first image Chant began to speak, making Rand think of his days at public school, or his early training with British Intelligence.

"I have summoned you all here, from Britain, Japan, and the Netherlands, because I am in need of your particular expertise. There is an important job that needs to be done within the next forty-eight hours. No governments are involved. This is something for which I feel personally responsible. Two years ago, when Russia first began having trouble with breakaway provinces, a number of disaffected military men of high rank arranged to remove a quantity of enriched, bomb-quality uranium from a missile silo."

He flashed the first slide on the screen and they were looking at two metal cylinders about two feet long and perhaps six inches in diameter. They seemed to be resting on the backseat of a car. "These cylinders of uranium have been offered for sale to a number of terrorist organizations in the Middle and Far East."

"I don't like handling uranium," the Dutchman said.

"You won't have to handle it. I'll do that myself. All you do is blow the safe."

"This enriched uranium is here in Vancouver?" Rand asked.

"It is. If we don't act, it will leave here in a diplomatic shipment, free from customs inspection, within seventy-two hours."

Rand leaned forward in his chair. "Let me make sure I'm understanding this. You've assembled us here to help you hijack an illegal shipment of uranium? What do you intend to do with it after you have it?"

"It will be turned over to an appropriate agency of the British government for proper disposal. For your time and effort you will be paid fifty thousand dollars each."

Tamara gave a low whistle at the amount. "That's a quarter-million for the five of us. Where are you getting that sort of money?"

"It's been put up by a wealthy person interested in keeping the material out of the hands of terrorists. That's all you need to know."

The old man, Sujo Imai, had remained silent, but now he spoke. "What part can there possibly be for me to play?"

"I'm getting to that," Chant said, bringing up the next slide on the wall. "This is the Chinese consulate, not far from here." It was a large, classically styled house, enclosed by a wall with an iron gate. He showed several interior photographs as he spoke. "The Chinese government only bought it a year ago and I obtained these pictures from the real-estate agent who handled the sale. The wall safe is actually here in the basement, built into the foundation wall. It's just large enough for those two-foot cylinders."

Tamara Cain shifted in her chair, allowing a bare leg to show between the folds of her white kimono. "Where's the Chinese consul while you're blowing open his safe?"

Oliver Chant smiled. "Having dinner with Sujo Imai."

And that was how he had it planned. Chant had already arranged the dinner meeting between the consul and Imai to discuss vague issues of Chinese encroachment on traditional Japanese areas of the city. Rand and Tamara's task would be to neutralize anyone still at the consulate, while Chant and the Dutchman went inside. The Dutchman would blow the safe, and Chant would remove the cylinders of enriched uranium.

"Even if the safe's in the basement, the neighbors are going to hear it blow," the Dutchman warned. "There's no way to muffle that size blast."

"We won't muffle it," Chant smiled at the objection, as if he'd been waiting for it. "It'll go off at exactly nine P.M. The neighbors will think it's the gun from Stanley Park, or an echo of it."

"It might work," the Dutchman decided with a trace of uncertainty in his voice. "That cannon can be heard all over this part of the city."

"How can you time it so exactly?" Sujo Imai asked. "It seems you are relying a great deal upon the fickleness of chance."

"Not chance, only science. My driver, Fergesson, will be positioned in Stanley Park with a cellular telephone. I will hear the nine-o'clock gun over the phone seconds before the sound waves reach the consulate. I'll press the button triggering the Dutchman's explosive charge and the blast should virtually merge with the sound of the cannon."

"When will the money be paid?" the Dutchman asked.

"Ten thousand now, the rest when the job is finished." He let his eyes move to each of them. "Is everybody in?"

They nodded, one at a time—the Dutchman, Sujo Imai, Tamara, and Rand.

"Good! I'll give you more details of the layout of the consulate and the positions of the guards."

It took them the better part of the afternoon to run over the plans step by step. Chant suggested that Rand and Tamara drive by the consulate in the daylight to get a better feel for the place, and let her borrow one of his cars. "Good idea," the woman agreed.

When they pulled away from the house and headed south into the residential area, Rand asked her, "Is this all an elaborate plot to seduce me?"

"What?"

"For the life of me, I can't figure out what this is all about. I sat there this afternoon and listened to Oliver Chant, and I couldn't believe a word of it."

"You believed the money, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I wonder if the rest of it will be forthcoming. He chose people who were no longer active in the business, but ones he knew would welcome a chance to get back in. Hans and Sujo and I are getting along in years."

"What about me?" she asked with a grin.

"Not you. That's why I wonder what you're doing in this mix. Chant probably knows we met in the past. That's why the seduction scenario occurred to me."

"I hope it was a pleasing scenario." When he didn't immediately answer, she asked, "How's your wife?"

"Fine. I'm a happily married man retired from a life of intrigue."

She turned a corner and slowed the car a bit. "That's the Chinese consulate on the right."

"A mansion, by any standards."

"I believe we can work the old auto-accident dodge. There are no guards at the gate, which is something in our favor."

Rand remained uneasy about the entire thing. They circled the block and Tamara offered to drop him at his hotel. He agreed, but on the way he asked, "Is there anyone who might want to get you out of the way for any reason?"

"You still won't accept Oliver's story!"

He glanced at his watch. "Do you have some time right now?"

"What for?"

"I want to go up to Stanley Park and look at the nine-o'clock gun."

They drove along Scenic Drive, the road that circled the peninsula that was Stanley Park. It stretched north from the city proper, its far end connected by a bridge to North Vancouver. Part of it jutted out to the east, into Burrard Inlet, and here they parked for a better view of a grouping of eight large totem poles. From the parking lot it was a brief walk across the road to the nine-o'clock gun. The small cannon, pointed toward the water, was fenced in and inaccessible.

"Is that what you wanted to see?" Tamara Cain asked.

"Yes, that's it." He stared out across the water, seeing the five-sail design of the cruise ship terminal at his hotel. "Where do they sail from here?" he asked.

"The cruise ships go mainly along the islands to Alaska."

"You've been here before?"

"I've flown over a few times. It's a lovely city. As you know, a great many Chinese and Japanese live here."

"Money," he said, almost to himself. "There must be a great deal of money in this city."

"And more every day, with wealthy Chinese moving here from Hong Kong."

By the time they returned to the hotel, it was almost six, and he invited her to join him for dinner. She parked in the garage and they walked a few blocks to the Lookout, a revolving restaurant that gave a good view of the city and its harbor.

Over drinks he asked, "What really brought you here, Tamara? Was it the money?"

"Partly, I suppose." Her English was almost perfect; some long-forgotten intelligence unit had schooled her well. "What brought any of us here? The money and the chance to do it again, to know that our lives aren't over yet."

Rand chuckled. "Your life is hardly over."

"Isn't it? I'm thirty-nine years old and the most exciting time of my life was two decades ago on the Mekong River. It's all been downhill since then."

"The world is a different place now. Most countries don't need our sort anymore."

"I suppose we're like that nine-o'clock gun, fired every night for ships that no longer need it."

Rand nodded. "And Oliver Chant came out of the past with an offer that nobody wanted to question."

Later, as they walked back to the hotel, Tamara Cain asked, "What do we do now?"

He chose to interpret her words as inquiring about the following day's activities. "Pick me up at noon. We've got to work out a plan to distract the consulate personnel."

"Does the consul have a wife?"

"She'll be dining with Sujo too. No worry there."

They parted at the front door and he went up to his room alone.

In the morning, which the elevator properly reminded him was Thursday, he went down to breakfast and then spent some time alone trying to work out the best way of gaining entry to the Chinese consulate. He had no intention of harming anyone, and that further complicated the planning. He returned to his room about eleven o'clock and was changing into his other jacket when the phone rang.

Expecting either Tamara or Chant, he was surprised to hear the voice of the chauffeur, Fergesson. "I have an important envelope for you, Mr. Rand, something you should see before you do anything."

"Oh?"

"I'm in the lobby. I'll bring it right up."

"All right. I'm on the tenth floor. I'll watch for you."

Rand opened the door and stood there a moment until he heard the familiar chime of the elevator. Making certain he had his electronic room key with him, he closed the door and walked down the hall to the elevator just as the doors slid open.

Fergesson lay on the floor, crumpled in an unnatural position. A slim-bladed dagger protruded from between his ribs. He raised his head for a second, trying to speak, and then died.

Holding open the elevator doors with his foot, Rand went quickly through Fergesson's pockets. There was no envelope, no notebook, nothing that might have had writing on it. He stepped back out of the elevator and let the doors slide shut. There was no blood, and he'd been careful not to touch anything that might pick up fingerprints. Someone else could find the body and raise the alarm.

Rand's first thought, back in his room, was to telephone Oliver Chant and report on the fate of his driver. But as he remembered the chauffeur's phone message—an important envelope, something he should see before doing anything—he decided against calling anyone. He listened at his door for the sound of sirens or other commotion but heard nothing. Presently he took an elevator down to the lobby. All was normal. Then he waited until the elevator appeared that had held Fergesson's body. Two men and a woman got out. There was no sign of the body.

Certainly the hotel personnel had not removed the body without calling the police, and there was no chance that Fergesson had still been alive. Rand had seen too many dead bodies in his

time to make a mistake like that. There was only one possibility—the killer had stabbed Fergesson as the elevator doors were closing and the body had gotten away from him. He'd then pressed the button to bring the elevator back to that floor after Rand found it. Fearing discovery, the killer had pulled the body off the elevator and sent it on its way. Sometime soon, Fergesson's corpse would turn up in a linen closet or a vacant room.

But if Rand hadn't found the envelope, the killer hadn't found it either. Otherwise why had he wanted the body back? Just to hide it?

At noon Rand was waiting outside his hotel when Tamara pulled up in the car. He'd decided to say nothing about the murdered chauffeur and wait until Chant commented on his disappearance. "I've got the information we need," Tamara told him as their car merged back into the flow of traffic.

"About the guards at the consulate?"

"There are three actual guards, plus a secretary who resides at the consulate. She's usually out on Thursday nights, so the guards are the only problem. The Dutchman needs thirty minutes to set his charges, which means we have to incapacitate the guards before eight-thirty."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rand said.

The five of them gathered at Oliver Chant's rented house for a light supper before the mission. The Dutchman spent most of the time tinkering with the wiring and switches for his explosive charges, which caused Tamara to mutter under her breath, "Why doesn't he eat them and blow himself up?"

"Isn't Fergesson joining us?" Rand asked Chant while they ate.

"I spoke to him earlier. He's going right to the park. He'll call my cellular phone shortly before nine."

The old Japanese code breaker hadn't eaten, and he was the first to leave. Chant drove him to the restaurant where he was to meet the Chinese consul general. A little later, Tamara said to Rand, "It's time for us to go."

At exactly five minutes past eight, when twilight had settled over the city, Tamara drove the rented car into the closed front gate of the mansion, setting off a half-dozen alarms within. A short Chinese man, obviously armed, hurried out to see what the trouble was.

"I had to swerve to avoid a car," she told the guard. "Sorry about your gate."

He peered at the iron bars, barely dented by the mishap. "It is nothing serious."

"I'm afraid to drive it now. Could I phone a friend to pick me up?"

He thought about that and said, "You come wait. I phone."

"Fine." She gave him the number of the cellular phone Rand was using.

He arrived within ten minutes, expecting to use the smoke bomb in his pocket. Instead he found that Tamara already had things under control. Two of the guards were tied together with duct tape. The third was unconscious on the floor. "I got lucky," she told him.

"Looks like it. Let's get this last one tied up before he comes to."

Tamara went outside to move her car down the block, then phoned Chant to tell him everything was fine. He and the Dutchman arrived a few minutes later, right on schedule.

"Any trouble?" Chant asked.

"None. Tamara did all the work."

They moved to the basement, where the Dutchman went to work with a stethoscope and power drill, stopping every few seconds to make certain he wasn't tripping the alarm system. The powerful plastic explosives were fitted into the holes he'd drilled. Then long wires were run to a battery and a small radio receiver.

"I'll set it off from the next room," Chant explained, holding up a tiny transmitter. "Now we wait for Fergesson's call."

Rand glanced at the others, trying to decide if either Tamara or the Dutchman was aware of Oliver Chant's bluff, and Rand was the most surprised of all when Chant's cellular phone rang at five minutes to nine.

"Hello, Fergesson? All's well here. Just keep the line open till they fire the cannon."

"That's him?" Rand asked.

Chant nodded. "Right on schedule." His finger moved to the button.

Rand resisted grabbing the phone from his hand to hear the voice at the other end. It would have done no good. The voice would not have spoken, or the connection would have been bro-

ken. The one thing he knew in this whole confusing business was that Fergesson was dead.

At exactly nine o'clock, by Rand's watch, the thump of the cannon fire was heard over the phone and Chant pressed his button. The explosion in the next room merged almost exactly with the distant sound of the nine-o'clock gun.

The Dutchman opened the connecting door to survey his handiwork. Rand had to admire his skill. He'd blown the door off the safe without even singeing its contents. Oliver Chant hurried to the wall, wearing gloves to protect against hot metal, and reached in to grasp a pair of metal tubes. He lifted them out with ease. It was obvious they were not the kind of heavy protective containers used for enriched uranium. "Let's go," he said, making no effort to look inside.

Once they were in the street, heading for the cars, the Dutchman asked, "What about the rest of our money?"

"We'll meet at my house at noon tomorrow."

"And the police?" Tamara asked.

"There'll be no police. The consul general is hardly in a position to report this."

By the time Tamara dropped Rand back at his hotel, he was beginning to wonder if the murder of Fergesson had really happened, if any of it had really happened. "Want a ride in the morning?" she asked.

"Why not? Eleven forty-five?"

"Fine. I'll meet you here."

He entered the lobby and saw the police at once, uniformed and plain-clothed. "What's happening?" he asked a room clerk.

"Some sort of accident. A man's body was found in a second-floor meeting room. It's nothing to be alarmed about."

So Fergesson really was dead, and his body had turned up at last. Rand headed for the elevators, and in that instant he knew what had happened to the envelope the chauffeur was bringing to his room.

He waited, as he had that morning, for the elevator where he'd found the dying man. A man and woman got in after him and they rode up in silence. Rand got off at the seventh floor and immediately pressed the down button. When the elevator returned, it was empty. He stepped inside, pressed Lobby and bent to lift a corner of the rug that said Thursday. If the rug was changed every night, that meant it was easily lifted from its inset

space in the elevator floor. Fergesson, dying, might have slid the envelope beneath it, fearing the killer would return for it.

And that was exactly what he'd done. Rand slipped the envelope into his breast pocket and left the elevator at the lobby floor.

The envelope contained a Xerox copy of a long newspaper article from *The New York Times*, dated a few years earlier, detailing the circumstances of the most valuable art theft in history. A dozen artworks, valued at some three hundred million dollars, had been stolen from a Boston museum. Paintings and drawings by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Manet, Degas, and others were part of the loot. In the margin of the article, Fergesson or someone had written: "Pegasus cast 2305 NRT."

The stolen paintings were here in Vancouver. Rand was certain of it. That was what had been in those two long tubes. Why Fergesson had tried to tell him about it, and the meaning of his marginal message, were mysteries still to be solved.

He hid the envelope in the small refrigerator in his room and thought about what to do. He had no doubt their money would be paid the following day. A quarter-million was nothing on a deal this big. He lay awake much of the night thinking about it. Toward morning he phoned Leila back in England.

"When will you be returning?" she asked.

"Soon. I have to check the airline schedules."

"Let me know. I haven't felt right about this trip."

Neither have I, Rand agreed silently.

He was quiet during most of the drive out with Tamara Cain the following morning. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Do you know that Chant's driver, Fergesson, is dead?"

"Was he killed in the park?"

"He never made it to the park. He was killed in my hotel yesterday morning because he was on his way to my room to tell me everything."

"What is there to tell?"

"I'll explain inside," Rand said as they parked in front of Oliver Chant's house.

They were the last arrivals. The Dutchman and the elderly Japanese, Sujo Imai, were seated with Chant by the big window overlooking Coal Harbour. "I was beginning to worry about you," Chant said, rising to greet them. "Was there any trouble?"

"He says Fergesson is dead," Tamara told them.

All eyes were suddenly on Rand. Chant chewed at his lower lip uncertainly. Finally he picked up an envelope from the coffee table and held it out to Rand. "Here's the rest of your money. I'm sure we all want to get out of Vancouver as soon as we can."

"What's this about Fergesson?" the Dutchman asked, ignoring Chant.

"He was stabbed to death in an elevator at my hotel." Rand took the envelope from his pocket and showed them the copy of the newspaper clipping, from which he'd carefully cut the penciled notation. "He was coming to give me this. We didn't steal enriched uranium. Those metal tubes in the safe contained rolled-up canvases stolen from a Boston art museum four years ago. They were on their way to a collector in China until Chant learned of it somehow and put together a team to hijack them before they left Vancouver."

"Who was Fergesson?" Tamara asked. "How does he fit in?"

"I believe he was one of the original museum thieves. For some reason, he decided he could get more money by telling Chant what he knew and stealing the paintings back again. Somehow he became disillusioned with Chant. I think he wanted to help the poor somehow with the proceeds from the robbery. When Chant wouldn't agree to that he was ready to tell me the truth, until he was killed." Rand turned to Oliver Chant. "Is that correct?"

Chant allowed himself a slight smile. "Close enough. But what you don't seem to realize, Mr. Rand, is that you aren't telling these people anything they didn't know in a general sort of way. Isn't that true, Sujo?"

The elderly man spoke from the sofa where he sat. "We are all discarded, Mr. Rand—even yourself. We have been thrown aside by the governments for whom we worked. Mr. Chant offered employment, a return to the old excitement, if only for a day. We were not in a position to question his story of the uranium, though I doubt that any of us really believed it. For myself, I dined with the enemy and deceived him for a few hours. Tamara used her charms to render three guards helpless. The Dutchman employed his skill with explosives one more time. Your skill, Mr. Rand—"

"Concealed Communications was my department," he answered, remembering the cryptic message Fergesson had left. "And yours?" Rand asked, turning to Oliver Chant.

"I was a paid assassin," Chant answered. "I killed Fergesson."

Rand nodded. "If you've received your money that means you've delivered the goods to the buyer."

"Correct. It is all over. You can't change things now. Accept the money and catch the next plane home."

Rand looked around at the others. "Is that what you want? Are you all satisfied to take the money and leave?" He could already read the answer in their faces. They'd had their day from the past. Now they were ready to go back home.

Rand left the house with his money, but he still felt he had to do something to earn it. Something for the reformed thief Fergesson.

Rand boarded flight 2305 to Tokyo twenty minutes before takeoff and slipped easily into the first-class seat next to Avtar Singh. "I see we meet again."

The Indian gentleman looked up with a smile. "Mr. Rand, isn't it?"

"You have a good memory. How's your horse coming along?"

"He managed the first part of the trip successfully. I don't anticipate any problem."

"That's fate, as they say. It's what you don't anticipate that will get you every time."

The Indian's face clouded. "What do you mean?"

Rand took out the brief message and showed it to him. "'Pegasus cast 2305 NRT.' A man named Fergesson was trying to give me this message. I believe you filled in for him in Stanley Park last evening when the nine-o'clock gun was fired."

"I have no idea what this means."

Rand pointed to the note. "This was simply for Fergesson's own memory, but when he was killed I was able to decipher it. 'Pegasus,' of course, is the winged horse of classical mythology—a flying horse, like yours. 'Cast' refers to the plaster cast on its supposedly injured foreleg. '2305' is the number of this flight; and 'NRT' is the code for Narita Airport in Tokyo."

Avtar Singh stared at him. "Chant said you were a smart man, but he thought you'd go along with it. I have a wealthy buyer in Tokyo."

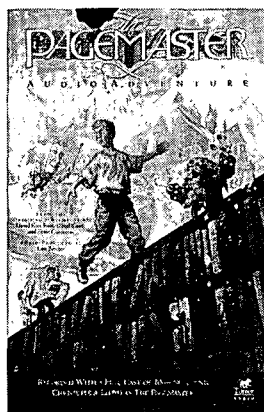
It was Rand's turn to smile. "Your buyer's going to be disappointed. If you'll collect your belongings from the overhead bin and leave quietly with me, this plane can be on its way. Your horse is already being removed from the rear cargo area. The police and art experts will be most interested in those priceless paintings wrapped inside the layers of that plaster cast on your horse's leg." ●



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THE JUDGE'S BOY

by Jean B. Cooper

A thought will jump out at you from behind a door; a memory will rise from the wet napkin under your drink. Everything comes back. Dreams too. This is a good dream, I'll say to myself: naked woman, a curving outstretched form negative against the light coming through a window shade; the room going gold. There is always a woman. Always a woman. Maybe it was the judge who told me that, along with all the other crap he put in my head when I would listen. Then the dream is gone, and it's the face of the judge I see.

When I dream, it's not really about the judge. I see him in my waking hours. I'm driving down 17 and turn off on a Carolina river road that's nothing more than a carriage lane, and there's His Honor the judge leaning against a live oak, rolling a cigaret. I'm tooling through Cottageville to Edisto Beach, going to drink beer, catch a fish, get this low-country fog out of my brain, and

standing under the rusted tin roof of an abandoned tobacco house in the middle of a field is the image of the judge, exhausted by his own evil.

The judge is dead. I know he's dead. I was there when they took his body five years ago. It's just the old ways of this sad moist land that keep him before me. It's the religion ringing from the small spare clapboard churches that spring up like ghosts in the marsh as I take the narrow turns at high speeds trying, maybe, to outrun my guilt, or to find some final pardon.

There is always a woman. Now I know when he said it to me (have always known, but the game, see, is to pretend it's dim and slipping away from me, falling off me like old clothes, ancient skin, and me, Ray Ford, emerging new and unscathed).

He said it when we were on the porch of my grandfather's house, a dingy wood-framed cottage that sat at the edge of a pond. A sandy road led to it, and I'd been mildly interested in the cloud of dust I saw coming at me down that road. A visitor. And me just returned to the empty house only the night before. Then I recognized the car, big and black. A 1974 Mercedes. The judge himself. Of course he would know I was . . . back. I almost said "home," but it wasn't home anymore.

The judge had come out of the car like a thundercloud building, one dark billow at a time, his enormous feet in glossy black wing-tipped shoes; next his heavy legs, lifted ponderously; then his dark-suited self, round and rumped. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and gingerly managed the three cement steps to the porch.

Jean B. Cooper lives in Columbia, South Carolina. Her story "The Judge's Boy," set in the Carolina low country, was one of seven finalists in the Mystery Writers of America's Fiftieth Anniversary Short Story Contest. It wasn't only her marvelous evocation of setting that impressed the judges; the author also did such a convincing job of getting inside the mind of her male protagonist that one of the judges (reading without author names) thought the story was written by a man.†

"Ray," he said, "I got some business I need you to take care of for me." Like we had been talking to each other at full tilt for hours. Like I had not been gone for ten years away at school, away at work for a law firm I hated. Like the cane-bottomed rocker was warm from him having sat in it all morning. He seemed to remember his manners then. "Well, it's good to see you, son."

We shook hands. Over his wide shoulder I glimpsed his driver, a big solemn black man, Durrell James. "All I have is coffee," I said.

"I don't want no coffee. I got a little business I want you to take care of for me."

"Maybe your man Durrell, there, would like something to drink."

The judge let a slow, yellow, gelid smile part his lips, but the eyes never left mine. "Don't do nothing for Durrell. Let it be."

In our years of growing up, Durrell James and I had never been friends, vying as we had for the attentions of the judge. We had more than once gone at it as boys. There was one fight when Durrell had held a knife at my throat, but the judge had walked in on us. You know there are some frogs that can go underground and live out of sight in the mud. That's what is out there in the swamp. Waiting. Hate and jealousy can be like that. I looked at Durrell. He was staring straight ahead, intent on marsh grasses.

I decided to be nonchalant in spite of the bile and maybe a wave of fear rising in me. "What in the world could an out-of-work lawyer do for the Honorable Galen D. Pringle, Retired?"

"I don't have time to joust with you, Ray. I will remind you only about who it was taught you everything you know, and I ain't talking about them silly-billies in Virginia, either. What you can do is this: I want you to find somebody for me."

"Find somebody?"

"Yes."

"You want me to find somebody for you?"

He sank into the unpainted rocking chair and sighed to let me know how I wearied him. He decided on a different approach. "Me and your dead granddaddy used to take john boats all over this place. I loved your granddaddy like a brother, but you, Ray, have always been a pain in the ass. Which is why you can't practice in somebody else's law firm. Got to be on your own."

Well, that's okay. It's how I did it. But don't give me grief this morning. I'm old, and I'm hot. Do this one thing for me."

He knew before my car turned onto the road that would take me back that I was coming. He knew that I had told one of the top firms in South Carolina they could stuff it, and that I'd walked out. Such were his sources. And because he knew me, he knew I would do what he asked. He was probably discussing it with Durrell as they rumbled down my forlorn road. Not one to waste a motion, the judge had grown fat and slow through excesses of life's pleasures and with economy of activity. He had paid for my education at U-Va. He had fed and clothed me and watched over me, according to his lights, because my mother was dead, my father was long gone, and because he and my granddaddy had roamed these backwaters in john boats in sweet, languid days. Days, the judge said, of his last remembered happiness. So he wanted me to find somebody.

"Whom shall I find for you?" I slung the bitter coffee into the bare, dry yard.

He did not look at me, but handed me a wallet-sized photograph of a black girl of indeterminate age, except to say young. She might have been fifteen or twenty-five. Her hair was pulled back tight and smooth. Her oval, defiant eyes looked at the camera as if she might climb through it. Her full mouth had no trace of a smile. "Who is this?"

"A girl worked for me. Tabblue . . ."

"Durrell's little sister?"

"Yes. But not little anymore. A thief and who knows what else."

I held the picture, recalled a skinny little girl, Tabblue James, but it was the judge I was watching. He was a wily old cuss, and if he wanted to find this girl, he could have a sheriff on her, the people in these hamlets, farmers, everybody looking for her. Even Durrell.

He shifted his bulk in the chair, flicked nonexistent lint from his trouser leg. "Don't be thinking why can't Durrell or somebody else be finding Tabblue for me. This is a sensitive situation. Durrell does not understand sensitive."

I looked again at the man in the car. No, Durrell could not be expected to have sensitivity. What Durrell had was hands like slabs of meat and a neck thick as a tree trunk. "Why is she

important to you?" I rested my back against the porch post and prepared for one of the judge's lies.

"She's not important. It's what she took that's important. She took my money."

I tried not to smile.

"I put her in my office, to give her a break, and what does she do but make off with cash from my safe!"

I could see by the pain in his watery eyes that his heart was broken. Parting with cash money for which he received absolutely nothing in return was a mortal wound to him. "I still don't see . . ."

"She took two hundred thousand dollars!" He spat the words at me. They sounded like water on a hot pan. "You think I want people knowing I had that kind of money on me? Durrell don't even know it. And you better not tell him, either."

Things were clearer. The judge had known the right people, done the right things, and had himself put on the family-court bench, which is not a position in and of itself that is a money-maker, but it has its bennies: You hang in there, don't muck up too much, and you just might get into a juicier position. The word is if you can go along and get along, you'll be around a long time. The judge could do that. He'd made a pile when the South Carolina coastline started developing. Cheap property overnight going through the roof. Somebody here and there dropped a word or two to Judge Pringle, and he knew what to buy and when to buy it. But he had gone to some trouble to let everybody believe he was almost broke all the time. Driving old cars, wearing cheap suits, and eating blue-plate specials at a grill in Walterboro, the county seat. The judge in town for court. The judge in tragic dramatic form. He'd seen *To Kill a Mockingbird* too many times, and probably would have given his left eye to shoot down a dog in the street.

He motioned for me to come closer. I did. He smelled of bourbon and some sweet aftershave. "Ray, I know where she is."

I looked at him. He had broken capillaries around his nose branching out onto his florid cheeks. How old was he now, seventy? "Where is she?"

"She thinks she's so smart." He looked into the middle distance, whether for effect or for real, I do not know. He shook his head sadly. "There is always a woman." Then finally, "She's on Melinda."

The judge owned Melinda Island. His only real-estate deal that did not pan out into big bucks. He'd started to develop it, but the native islanders raised such a stink about it that he dropped it rather than be confronted by the NAACP or whatever investigative news program decided to take him on. The judge did not wish to be investigated by anyone at any time. "How do you know she's there? Why wouldn't she just hightail it out to Canada, the Bahamas, wherever?"

He stood up. Suddenly he did not seem angry or agitated. "I just know, that's all. You go over there and get her for me. She'll remember you. You bring her back to me. It's not even a day trip, Ray. Do this one last thing for me. What with emphysema, gout, and whatall, I won't make it to the end of the year. All debts will be paid between you and me."

The judge had been dying for the last thirty years from some imagined protracted malady or other. In his heart of hearts he really believed he would live forever. "What makes you think she'll come with me?"

He got into the back of the car and was closing the door. "You'll charm her, Ray, just like you've always charmed everyone." Durrell gunned the big car and threw sand back into my face.

A bad deed is best done quickly. That's not quite Shakespeare, but it's close enough. I set out the next morning for Melinda Island. It's isolated. They don't even have mail delivery. Every now and again someone of the few families who live there will boat over to French Island, pick up mail and some sundry things, then go back. You can forget Melinda Islanders even exist. In fact, they wish you would. I took the ferry across to French Island, rented a small outboard, and docked in Melinda about lunchtime. There's only one place to eat there: Loobie's Shack. Loobie is one of three white people who live on Melinda. The other two are his sister and her husband. Loobie's name is Lou B. Dunn. He retired from the navy in Charleston and opened this bait and tackle shop and makes a mean cheeseburger. His beer is so cold. I remembered it from my high-school days when the judge would bring me over so he could walk his beautiful but poor island to mourn what might have been. Loobie sneaked me beers then. Loobie told me things he thought I might need to know: how to fish for sheephead; how to cure a hangover. Loobie said to me things men say to each other as cautionary

tales: Ray, watch a man's hands. If a man's gonna hurt you, he'll use his hands.

When I walked into his place, he recognized me, even after ten years.

"Ray!" His grip was firm as ever. He pulled a dripping beer out of his case. "What brings you here?"

We were both ten years older. His military buzz cut was frosty now, but he was still Loobie in a dirty T-shirt, frazzled khakis, and an apron tied at his big belly. I didn't see a health-department rating sign up anywhere, but I breathed in air saturated with crab, beer, hot grease, and salt water. It was good.

"I'm looking for somebody."

"Is that right?" He chewed on his cigar stub. "Who's that?"

I figured he knew. But I played on anyway. I showed him the photo. "Tablue James. The judge wants to talk to her."

"That sonofabitch." Loobie took a hand towel and zapped a fly with it. "Why don't he come hisself?"

We both knew why Judge Pringle would not come to Loobie's. Loobie had told him during the first stages of the judge's real-estate plans that if he set foot in Loobie's establishment, the judge would be gut shot. "He's getting old." I let Loobie consider that for a beat then I said, "He could have sent Durrell."

"Durrell." Loobie's voice was filled with loathing. Most people steered clear of Durrell James. He was born a menace and lived to prove it. How he avoided jail is a mystery, even with the judge on his side. "You know what they say about him, Ray? I don't know if it's true, but they say he beat up a girl over in Georgetown, and then because she wasn't dead, he set her on fire."

I said, "He's quite a guy, huh?"

"Let the judge send Durrell. I'll cut that sonofabitch from stem to stern. I'll hang him out for the sea gulls to pick at. Wouldn't nobody on this island, including his own people, give a rip about it. He's terrorized too many of them for too long."

I turned the beer up. Loobie was mean as death, but he was old and probably slow. Durrell was maybe twenty-nine and didn't know the concept of remorse. Me, I'm the kind that'll either outwit you or sneak up on you. I am, in those things, like the judge, and it hurts me to admit it. "I'm here because the judge wants to talk to Tablue."

Loobie got a beer for himself. "None of my business. You want to see that girl, suit yourself. It's a small island. You won't get no help."

That was true. Most of the people knew my connection with Judge Pringle, and those who did not outright hate him at the least mistrusted him, and would not give up Tabblue.

"She ever come by here?"

"Everybody comes by here. Hell, Ray, even you're here." Loobie reached with astonishing speed, caught another worrisome fly with his hand, and shook it silly in his massive fist.

The rain started about half an hour later. It was steady, beating on Loobie's broad glass-front window and his tin roof. He had two booths in the long part of his L-shaped hovel. I slid into the one on the left, sat facing the door, and ate some boiled shrimp. The wind had picked up a little, making the screen door slap. Every time it did I looked up and saw nothing, just more rain on the window. I dozed off a couple of times. Then out of the rain there she was. Tabblue James.

She shook the water from her jacket and hung it on a peg by the door. There was only the insistent drumming of the rain, Loobie's hand coming out with a cup which Tabblue took, and she headed straight for me. Her dress was black and short, more like a T-shirt, but with the neck cut low. I watched her coming; I couldn't help it. Ten years had grown into long legs and hollows and swells you can't take your eyes off of. She wore no shoes. I stood when she stopped at the booth. She didn't even look at me, but sat in the booth and put her coffee cup on the table.

I said, "Don't the shells hurt your feet?"

She took a sip of the coffee and turned her bronze eyes up at me. "You look the same. Bigger, though."

"You remember me?" I'd been trying since the day before to recall Tabblue James, but all I could manage was a skinny little kid standing inside her mama's door when the judge and I would drive out to the ramshackle house to pick up Durrell. And Durrell never said anything about his family.

"You the judge's boy."

There was just the slightest emphasis on the word "boy." I said, "I'm Ray Ford. I worked for the judge when I was a kid."

"My brother, Durrell, he hates your guts."

"Yes, well, Durrell is good at that."

Tabblue broke into a wide grin. She had a small space between her top front teeth. It was not unattractive. It was like a little door and you might want to go in there. She said, "He's good at some other things, too." Her grin disappeared. "Why you here?"

I wanted to get it over with. At least that's what I was telling myself. "The judge wants you to come back with me."

"I bet he does." She took a napkin from the dispenser on the table and dabbed at the water on her chest and arms. "And you came to get me. You still work for Judge Pringle? A grown man like you still an old man's errand boy?"

"He says you are a thief. He says he did you a favor and you took advantage of him. Said you stole some money."

Her eyes widened. I thought for an instant she might slap my face like an offended woman in those old black and white movies. Instead she slumped against the back of the booth and shook her head.

I said, "You mean you didn't take the money?"

She was studying the contents of her cup. "Oh, I took the money. I cleaned out his office safe. What gets me is he told you he did me a favor? That's what he said?"

"More or less."

She let out a long sigh. "A favor."

Up at the front, the door continued to bang with the wind, and a fog had gathered, even inside of Loobie's, where it mingled with cooking fumes and steam. The weathered walls were damp. The light was low now. There was a heavy thunderstorm out there. I hoped I had tied up the rented outboard well enough.

She broke into my worry. "The judge does that for people, doesn't he? Did you a favor or two?"

It was not a secret. The Fords had always been backwater people, and who my daddy was never came to light. My mother took that information to her grave. I was eight years old, and they pulled my poor mother out of the creek where the car she had just learned to drive had landed after she took a curve too fast. I was left to Granddaddy Cleatus Ford, a man aged and failing when I was born, and not able to care for an eight-year-old boy. Judge Galen Pringle, with his powers as a family-court judge, took on my care. It was a favor, but to Cleatus Ford, not to me. I said to Tabblue, "I worked for what I got from Judge Pringle. Durrell did, too. There were many times we would have preferred fishing for shad or crappie to shoveling out the judge's horse stalls or washing his car, cutting his grass. We were just kids. I'm not here to talk about me. I'm here to ask you to make everything right with the judge, to come back with me."

Tabblue picked up my beer bottles with long slender fingers. "In this weather? No, settle back, Ray. Let's have a talk."

I watched her walk to the front, saw her slender profile as she leaned over Loobie's counter and got two beers. Tabblue moved like water coming back to the booth, like an inexorable wave rolling toward shore. From her toes to her sleek head she was liquid and lovely. Yet I felt something wasn't right. I didn't mind she was a thief. I'd lived in big cities, had lunch and kept society with all manner of thieves daily. But still, about Tabblue there was something. She sat, and I dismissed that nagging feeling to the effects of, the spell of being back in the South Carolina lowlands again after a long absence. You forget the magic and the mystique of this haunted place. Time is different here, amorphous and intoxicating in its own way. I'm not even sure how long we sat there with the fresh drinks before she said, "I'm not going back."

"He could put the law on you."

"Could. But ask yourself, why hasn't he?"

I had asked myself that on the way to Melinda. I figured:

1. He wants to keep quiet about the money
2. He wants Tabblue spared embarrassment
3. He doesn't want the hassle of the law

Maybe. But then I had said to myself: She's got something on him.

"You've got something on him."

Her eyes sparkled and narrowed. She laughed, but without mirth. She was about to say something, but changed her mind. Then: "Your name is Ray. Like in sunshine? Your mama name you that?"

I had not thought about my mother like that for so long that the question caught me off guard. "I don't know. I guess so." I was trying to remember.

"Ray, tell me about your mother."

"She's dead."

"I know. I'm sorry. So is mine. But tell me about your mother anyway."

The rain came, driven sideways at the window in Loobie's, and there was a tight cold howl in the wind. I took a long pull on the beer and a long look at the dripping glass window, vapor condensing because of the heat in the cafe. Down here something is always becoming something else. My mother's face almost

came to me, pulled up from those faraway days when her voice was a grace note through Granddaddy's little house. I could remember walking down that road to the house, feeling the warm sand between my toes. My mother was beside me. The sun was hot on my neck. My hand was in hers. She's talking, because I recalled her soft words. . . .

Under the table I grabbed Tablue's ankles and held them, squeezing. "Stand up now."

Tablue's face was blank. Our eyes locked. She stood. It was her feet. I had noticed, but had not seen. She was missing her little toes, from each foot the little toe gone. I looked down at them and felt the tiny hairs on my neck lift. That walk down the sandy road, my feet, my mother's feet. My mother was missing her little toes.

"Ray, the judge likes to own things," Tablue said.

You condition yourself. You force yourself to avoid emotions: fear, sadness, loneliness. The one thing as a man you will allow yourself to have is anger. I was having a feast of it, felt it filling me until I thought my eyes would pop out onto the table and look back at me.

Tablue said, "You don't look so good."

She got up and came back with a soft drink. This time she sat beside me. I felt her press up against me, heard her voice go inside my ear and grab me somewhere low and deep. "Baby, I'm in it up to my nose, and I need your help. These people here on Melinda can help just so much. I got to get away."

I sipped the drink. "Nobody's keeping you, Tablue." I shook my head to loosen the memory of my mother walking.

"The judge is a powerful man. You got to come out of the dark. It's time you saw what's real."

"Tablue, what do you have to say to me?" I did not look at her while she spoke.

Her mother had told her. There'd been talk about it for years. The judge and my mother. I knew Mama'd gotten pregnant at fifteen and whoever the father was had taken off. But Tablue said, shortly after I was born, from the fields her people would see the judge's car snaking through the countryside, my mother in there with him.

Tablue lit a cigaret, picked a piece of tobacco from her tongue. "They say your mama, she was gone leave him. He took her toes. Not too long after that she had the wreck. My mama was there

when they pulled her from that water. He was there too, the judge. Mama said he liked to died on the spot, was clawing at the car door for her."

"Yeah? You have a lot of information. You're not trying to tell me that old man is my father." I never would have believed that.

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

"Where do you fit into this, Tabblue?"

She got up and sat across from me again. Her mood had changed. We were no longer confidants. There was a childish quality to her voice. "I'm no angel. You been gone a long time. But look around you. What is in this place for me? The judge, he puts me to work in his office, and one thing leads to another."

"So. You and the judge." It was an image I could not manage. Tabblue, in her early twenties, and the judge. I'd had enough for one day. "I'm done with this. Get Durrell to help you. He is, after all, your big brother."

This time her laughter was quick, loud, and hoarse. I saw Loobie look back at us. "Who you think held me down when Judge took my toes?"

That I could believe. "You've got two hundred thousand dollars of the judge's money. That'll get you away from him and from your brother. Just leave. It's what I'm going to do."

"You can't go anywhere in this storm. That's three miles of bad water out there now." She leaned across the table to me and said, like she'd just thought of it, "Tell you what. You come home with me. I fix you a nice fish stew, hush puppies, or griddle cakes."

It's a misery to realize that everyone who knows you thinks you're stupid. What had I done or not done to give them that impression? I'd been raised in the inlets, marshes, and swamps by a man whom I always knew was despicable. Children know when things aren't right. Children see what goes on, and eventually they put it all together no matter how it breaks their hearts. Buried deep into my psyche were my mother's missing toes and glimpses of the judge's hand on her shoulder, her hip. I dredged up quick whispers between them. Now the judge had sent me for Tabblue. Now Tabblue invited me home.

"You want to cook my supper, Tabblue?"

"Why not?"

Why not, indeed? "You do look good in that black dress." She smiled broadly. "I dressed for you."

"I know you did. Does the judge like black?"

She almost lost it a little, but she was good, I'll give her that. "No, honey," she cooed. "He likes white."

The clouds were bruised and low, but the rain was lighter. The wind was at about sixteen knots. We walked a mile under broad dripping oaks. The worn house where she was staying was dark and silent. Tablue walked ahead of me, stepped lightly onto the porch and opened the door. She went in. When I did not follow, she came back out. "Ray?"

I went in.

There was no dignity in what we did. It was just something to do, something to kill a rainy night. I lay beside her afterward in the shadowed room. Finally the rain had stopped. The moon broke through the clouds in a tide of truth. Its light shone golden through the window and spilled over Tablue's sleeping body.

There were only a few hours left. The storm had prevented his coming, but now, with the weather right, Durrell would come. It was almost first light when I heard what I'd been listening hard for. Tablue slept on. There it was again. He was so sure of himself, he was coming through the front door. I eased from the bed and pressed my back against the cool wall behind the door. Durrell entered, crouched, ready to spring. I caught him over the back of his head with a brick I'd found by the back porch. He went down. I hit him again.

On the bed Tablue sat frozen, her mouth open. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know." I felt for a pulse. "No, he's alive."

Her words shot at me. "Kill 'im."

"What?"

"Do it! You don't, he's gone come for you sure."

I went outside and came back with Tablue's clothesline. I tied Durrell's hands and his feet. Tablue sat in her bed smoking, furious with me, and not knowing what her next move should be.

I said, "Durrell put you up to taking the money." She was silent except for desperate drags on her cigaret. Her big eyes watched me, tried to fathom how much I knew. "Durrell put you up to it, and you and he were going to, what . . . leave?"

"Durrell is tired of driving the judge's car. What's it matter to an old man like that anyway, sick as he is? Rolling in money he'll never use. Durrell and me, we had some of it coming. That crazy man took my toes off!"

"With Durrell's help."

Her cigaret flared hot as a laser. "I haven't forgot that. Why you think I'm doing what Durrell told me to do?"

"Why do you think he has two cans of kerosene outside the house?" She looked at her cigaret and stubbed it out. "I take it Durrell didn't say anything about that to you, did he? What did he say, 'Just get cozy with Ray Ford, little sister, and let Durrell handle the rest?'" I'd found the cans when I'd gone for the clothesline. They were meant just as much for Tabblue as they were for me. She could see that. Durrell was a loner. He had never needed a partner, even if she was his sister.

Tabblue got out of bed and walked over to her brother. She kicked him. He did not stir. But soon he would. Maybe I'd cracked his thick skull, but Durrell James was like the rent: He'd just keep going on, just keep getting up. I left them there in that half-light. They could fight it out, do what they would with the money.

Down by Loobie's I untied my boat and started out across the water toward French Island. Halfway across the inlet I heard a muffled noise. Gulls squawked overhead. Looking back at Melinda, I saw a black plume rising to blend with the mother-of-pearl morning clouds. A lick of red flame showed. Tabblue had made her move. And she just might get away with it.

The judge lived in an antebellum house badly in need of renovation. I pulled my car into his circular gravel drive and let myself in the front door. It was almost midday, but the interior of the house, with its fourteen-foot ceilings, was cool and dark as a tomb. After a thorough search of the downstairs, I found him upstairs in his bedroom, alone. My heart had raced, wondering whether I'd find some of Durrell's handiwork, but in his big, high bed the judge lay.

When I entered, his eyes opened, and his hand flopped on the counterpane. His bedside table was littered with upset prescription medicine containers. Some pills lay on the floor. When the judge spoke, I could barely hear him. "Ray. That Durrell." I moved to his bedside. His face seemed to have fallen in on itself. He had a bad color to him. It looked to me as if after all his years of complaints, something had finally got to him. But he was still the judge, and he was trying to gather enough of himself into this one place. He pushed up onto his pillows. It was a

mighty effort. I watched. "Ray." The old man licked his dry lips. His eyes went to his empty water glass. I stood still. "Ray. Durrell took my money."

"I know."

"I swear I'm dying."

"You just might be."

"Durrell took my medicine and put it over there on the mantelboard." I looked across the room. On the mantelboard sat a prescription bottle. "It's my heart. You hand me them pills. I'll put one in my mouth and maybe pull out of this thing."

I did not move.

He closed his eyes. For a long moment we stayed like that. He then opened his eyes again and said, "Hand me the pills, boy. You know you want to do it. You've always had a sense of the heroic."

I sat over by the window, listened to the doves in the myrtle trees, listened to his breath come out in short rasps. My old granddaddy knew two things: the backwaters and the Bible. It was he who tried to drill into me the Gifts of the Spirit. I'm low in most of them except patience. I can wait. I'm the most patient man there ever was. It took awhile for the judge to die. It was evening, with the sun going down in a flood of orange behind a stand of pines, when I took one last look at the body of Judge Galen Pringle. What had he done to my young ignorant mother? He wasn't my father. We did not look anything alike. I straightened his bedclothes. I set all his medicine bottles, including the longed-for bottle on the mantel, back into position on his nightstand. I called the doctor whose name appeared on the bottles.

I still live here in this low country. I'm Ray Ford, the judge's heir. I own the old house. I own Melinda Island. I practice a little law, and I go fishing with my friend Loobie, who swears that Tablue's house just up and burned that day and the islanders had let it. One of Tablue's cousins had taken her over to French Island. She has not been seen since. Driving these back roads, I do have visions of the judge. Tricks of the mind. They don't bother me. One of these days, if you believe my granddaddy's religion, I'll have to answer for what I did not do for the judge. Meanwhile, the fish are biting, the beer is cold, and the dreams of the absent Tablue are fond and familiar. ●

THE TEAM

by William Bankier

T

here's no use trying to please the unpleaseable." Jimmy Mason's mother gave him that advice in the year before she died. He was spending a lot of time with her. One of their outings was the hour drive from Baytown to the Sandbanks on Lake Ontario. The subject was his father.

"The problem with having a crazy family member," she went on, "is that it can make everybody else in the family a little crazy."

"I never thought of Dad as crazy."

"They don't have to foam at the mouth. He's a decent man. But he's obsessed. Baytown is not an important place. Al Mason's Sporting Goods is just another store on Front Street. Yet he sees himself as a towering figure. Because of you."

"He hates me, Mother. I passed up the football scholarship to stay here with you."

Queen's University had scouted Jimmy Mason. They wanted the Baytown High School star to come and catch passes for the Golden Gaels. He was ready to go, his father was bragging about it to his friends. Then Pauline Mason was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She submitted to radiation therapy. Now they wanted to try chemo.

But Pauline had worked at the hospital as a ward clerk. She knew what was coming. So she decided to eke out a few months at home with her family. Then her friend the doctor would douse the pain with drugs. And she would try to die with as much

Family relationships are at the heart of much of William Bankier's mystery fiction, and in that respect his work has a realistic flavor. There is a whimsical side to Mr. Bankier's nature, however, that lets us count on there being something pleasingly offbeat in each of his stories. "The Team" is a new entry in his long-running series of Baytown adventures. †

dignity as she could hold on to.

"This will be finished soon," she reassured him. "You two will get back on the same page." Her eyes looked into the past. "Al Mason is not as tough as he pretends to be. Take my word for it. He could use your help."

The afternoon was waning. She went to lean against the car while Mason shook sand from the blanket and folded it across his chest. With her hands in her pockets, the breeze catching the crimson kerchief enclosing the thin, pale face, she looked like a model. The wasting disease had brought her, near the end, to this pinnacle of high fashion. She was watching him with a wistful stare. Seeing those solemn eyes, Mason thought of Greek mythology. He saw a rocky island with doomed ladies looking out to sea.

In the car, driving away from the shore, he said, "Where would you like to go tomorrow?"

"You mustn't spend every day with me."

"Yes, I must." They were a long way beyond fear of death, having talked the subject into submission. "I'm the lucky one. Most guys get a telephone call, your mother died. But I've been given lots of notice. So we can have all these days together."

"What about Erin? You should spend time with her."

"Erin is not like the great Al Mason. Erin understands."

Now, less than a year after his mother's funeral, Jimmy Mason was in Montreal and asking Erin Shaw to understand something else. "This is no big deal," he said to her over drinks in the Lilac Lounge.

"It's strange, Jimmy. It isn't right. I have to think about it." She had picked up some sun sitting in the bleachers, watching him practice with the Alouettes football team. Her mass of blond curls, the wide-set green eyes, the dew on the velvet skin—most men in the bar could not stop looking at her. Their fascination was what had given Mason the idea.

"I can't go home without money."

"You keep saying that."

"I need it to show the old man." Mason's decision to attend training camp was an attempt to mend fences with his father. The team had not invited him. He had asked if he could come. But he was not being paid. Nor would he see a dollar unless he made the team.

Chances of that were zero, Mason realised, after nearly three weeks in camp. The established players were at another level entirely. And the college prospects were all ten pounds heavier and a step faster than Jimmy Mason.

Now his savings were gone. Erin had brought some holiday money, but that was spent, too. "If I show up flat broke, Dad will call me a loser. But if I can put a couple of grand on the table, he'll be impressed. I'll tell him the team paid me. That they invited me to stay but my knee went out. I'll say they've asked me back next season."

Erin had a way of looking at him. Her eyes went sleepy, as if he had crossed her palm with silver to have his fortune told. "Aren't you afraid of something happening to me?"

"I'll be right behind you. You'll only be alone with the guy for a couple of minutes." He held both her hands. They were damp from the condensation on her gin and tonic. "The badger game is not prostitution. You go to our motel room with him, then I show up as the husband. The guy feels threatened, he wants out. He pays for me not to beat him up. And he won't go to the cops. Because he doesn't want his family to know he was picking up women."

The atmosphere in the bar was familiar. Erin thought of herself in the cocktail lounge at the Coronet Hotel, playing piano. She had a trick that always worked. Whatever the tune, she played the first chorus like a concerto, loading it with arpeggios. Then she would slide into the blues style, letting the tempo swing. You could guarantee a ripple of applause at that point.

It was a good life, teaching music appreciation and theory at Baytown High School. Then her three nights a week at the Coronet. Too bad Jimmy Mason was making things so complicated. He had a real problem with his father.

She hung her head. "Can you believe we're doing this?"

"We have no choice."

As he said this, Mason knew he was enjoying the feeling of being in control. He had to stay on top. If he came creeping back to Baytown with his tail between his legs, his father would have a field day. "What did I tell you?" he would say. "The pros took one look and sent you home. You threw away your money."

Instead, he was going to walk in and put a pile of cash on the kitchen table. Al Mason would be crouched over his bowl of oatmeal. He made pots of the stuff and ate it twice a day. With salt. The sight of the money would open those watery blue eyes.

Erin had finished her drink. He suggested another one, but she refused. "I better not lose my head," she told him, producing a sarcastic smile. "I might get carried away. Some of these guys look like real studs."

They decided on a young man sitting at the end of the bar. He was alone, he was obviously cruising. On more than one occasion, his roving eye had met Erin's. This time, she gave him the sleepy smile.

Mason got up, said goodbye to his woman, and left the bar by the front door. He crossed the street and took up a position between cars in the parking lot of the Normandie Motel.

Erin did not take long. They came out of the bar and waited for the light at the pedestrian crossing. As they crossed the street, the guy took her hand. Mason felt it in his stomach. Suddenly he was a complete stranger with no place to go.

Erin guided the man to unit nine, unlocked the door, and led him inside. The door closed and Mason was left with a decision. How long should he wait before going in? He decided to give them five minutes.

It was getting dark. It began to rain. This was one exciting city, but it was terrifying, too. Mason suddenly understood why places like Montreal exist, why so many millions of people congregate together. You can hide here. You don't have to perform as expected for a few dozen neighbors who have known you forever. They were all small fish in this enormous pond. It was better to be a small fish.

Time to go inside. Mason was not sure how he would handle it. But he was bigger than the visitor, he had made sure of that. He walked quickly between cars, reached the door of unit nine, and used his key to enter without knocking. They were sitting side by side on the bed, like teenagers. Not so much as a jacket had come off. Erin said, "Roy, don't start anything." They had decided on false names. She could be Colleen.

"Damn it, Colleen. I can't leave you alone for a minute!" He began pacing the room, picking up objects and putting them down. "I go out for cigarettes, I come back and you're gone."

"We only came here to talk."

"I was just leaving." The victim got to his feet.

"You're not going anywhere." Mason pushed the man back down onto the bed, roughly.

"Cut it out, Roy! Keep your hands off him!"

"I think I'll teach the bastard to stay away from my wife."

"Let him go, Roy. Let the guy leave."

Mason had been knocking people around at training camp. And been knocked around. It was easy to twist the man's arm behind his back. "Suppose I start by breaking your arm."

Erin ran at Mason. She grabbed hold of him and he let himself be pulled away. "I warned you if you ever beat up anybody again."

"You don't have to do this." The man was having trouble breathing. "Let me leave."

"Let's see your wallet."

"Take it." He found a billfold inside his jacket and handed it to Mason.

Mason snatched out the money. There was a lot of it. He saw a couple of hundred-dollar bills. He handed back the empty wallet. "Now get out of here."

When they were alone, Mason let out a deep sigh. "Was that easy or what?" Erin went to the washbasin where she turned on both taps and began throwing water on her face. "Let's take a look at what we've got here." He counted the money. In addition to the hundred-dollar bills, there were lots of twenties. It came to \$440. "Not bad for a half-hour's work," he concluded.

"You call that work?"

"He had it coming. He came to a motel with another man's wife."

"Nobody said anything about wife. We set him up and we robbed him."

Mason picked up a towel. He turned her around and began dabbing water from her face. The pale green eyes were so solemn, he had to laugh. "Will you chill out?"

"When can we go home?"

"Soon. We need a couple more scores."

They went down the street to the Siesta Bar. It would be a mistake to be seen coming and going from the same place. A man was playing the piano there. He was not outstanding. After ordering drinks, Mason said, "You could give him lessons."

"Not in self-respect," Erin said.

"You aren't going to let up, are you."

"Let's just get this over with." Erin took a big swallow of her drink. "Once we get home," she said, "I don't think I'll be seeing you anymore."

"You'll change your mind."

"This trip has been an education."

They chose a loner at a small table on the back wall. He was middle-aged, balding, wore glasses. He had the face of a habitual drinker. His suit was expensive. Mason went to the washroom to give Erin a chance to make contact. When he came back, she said, "He's ours."

Mason could feel the electricity coming off her. She was sitting a little straighter, and when she lifted her glass, her glance slid across his shoulder so her eyes sent a charge across the room. "Don't tell me you aren't getting a kick out of this," he said.

"You're teaching me what I could be," she conceded. "I don't have to like it."

It went pretty much as before. Mason left the bar and walked along wet pavement to his place in the motel parking lot. The rain had stopped. Erin and the middle-aged man appeared in minutes, hurrying to unit nine. The man's jacket was across her shoulders. His white shirt gleamed under patterned suspenders.

Mason gave them their five minutes. When he let himself into the room, the man was nowhere in sight. Erin inclined her head towards the bathroom door. Mason raised his voice. "What the hell is going on?"

Erin called, "Ollie, you'd better come out here."

He appeared, rubbing his hands together. His face was drained of color, his eyes wide behind the rimless glasses. Ollie saw that he was in trouble. He wanted out. Mason pushed him hard on the shoulder. He could see it hurt. He pushed him again in the same place.

This wallet contained even more money than the first one. When the man was gone and he counted the take, Mason said, "Guess what. Here's five hundred and seventy-five dollars. That's over a grand for the two together."

Erin lay back on the bed with her hands behind her head. Her eyes were closed. "Congratulations."

"All we need is one more. Then we can leave. Are you up for one more?"

"Not tonight, Josephine," she said. And she turned her face to the wall.

The skies cleared overnight. Mason sneaked out of bed, put on clothes without making a sound, and left the motel room for

his morning walk. He could not help feeling good. Dawn was breaking, the cool air smelled clean. He walked as fast as many people would run, covering block after block, swinging his arms, breathing deeply.

They would be eating breakfast at the training camp, deep voices complaining. This was a strange time for Jimmy Mason. His plan to join the Montreal pro-football team was a mistake. He had not done it for himself. It was a desperate attempt to please his father.

Why was it so easy for him to connect with his mother, while any rapport with his father was impossible? When she was diagnosed terminal, they put their heads together and agreed what to do. They negotiated the time together. But with Al Mason, Jimmy was always on thin ice. Even when it came to choosing a movie on television, they were in opposition.

Something came clear to Mason as he turned and began walking back to the motel. He was an intruder in his father's life and always would be. It must have started when he was born. Al and his wife were a team. The baby was competition. His father had never stopped trying to beat him out, and never would.

Erin must have heard him leave the room. She was dressed and packed when he let himself back in. "Hey, we aren't going just yet."

"I can't hang around here another night."

"We agreed we'd do one more." He stood behind her. On a better day, he would have put his hands on her, would have worked those tense muscles in her shoulders. "We'll choose somebody this afternoon. By three o'clock, we'll be driving away from here."

The man this time was heavysset, with a perspiring face. His dark blue suit was wrinkled. He stood at the bar with one buttock on a stool, keeping the bartender busy. He was not the one either of them would have chosen. He selected himself, making eye contact with Erin every chance he got. When Mason focused on him, he took his time glancing away.

Mason left the bar and crossed the street. Waiting in the parking lot, he felt his heart pounding in anticipation. Was the badger game addictive? Maybe it went beyond the money. Back home in Baytown, would he begin beating up guys who looked at his woman, just for the satisfaction of staying on top?

Erin walked a couple of steps ahead of the roly-poly man in blue. Mason had no trouble reading her. She wanted to be finished and gone. He gave them five minutes, then went to unit nine and let himself in.

The man was using the telephone while Erin sat on the bed with her knees together. Mason was taken aback. This guy was altogether too comfortable. He was saying, "So you close up. I won't be back."

Mason came halfway to him and stood with his hands away from his sides. "Whenever you're finished."

The man put down the telephone. "Surprise, surprise," he said. "Look who shows up."

"What the hell are you doing in my room with my wife?"

"Ask her."

"I'm asking you."

"I get it. Now you take my money." The man tried to crowd past Mason. "Only I'm not giving it to you."

Mason gathered a fistful of lapel. The man flung out his arm, dislodging Mason's grip. Mason used both hands to seize the man's shoulders and force him against the wall. This was when the stranger produced a gun. It was a snub-nosed automatic and he hauled it from his waistband with the flourish of a pirate drawing a cutlass.

Erin saw what was happening and yelled, "Jimmy, let him go!"

Mason backed off. He raised his hands.

"Different ballgame, folks. You picked the wrong mark. How many guys did you work this on?"

"You're the first," Mason said.

"Give us a break," Erin pleaded.

"I intend to. I won't call the police. And I won't shoot you. Not if you hand over the money."

"We're broke," Mason said. "Why do you think we tried this?"

"Can I go to the drawer?" the girl asked.

Mason yelled, "Erin!"

"Do it, Erin," the gunman said.

She found the money in the bedside cabinet. As she handed it over, she told Mason, "This is our lives."

After he closed the door behind him and they had listened to his footsteps running away across the parking lot, Erin said, "Shall I call the police?"

"We can't do that. What if they find him? He'll say what happened."

"His word against ours."

"Cops are not fools." Mason sat in the chair facing the blank TV screen. He put his head in his hands. Erin gave him some time. She moved packed suitcases to a position near the door. She washed her face in the bathroom, then came back and ran a brush through her hair in front of the dresser mirror. Finally, she knelt beside him and put both arms around his shoulders.

"Listen to me. We could have been killed. We're not even hurt."

"We go home broke."

"You never wanted to play pro football. You tried it to please your father. It didn't work. Tell him."

"He doesn't want to hear."

"He's in bad shape since your mother died. He needs you, even if he won't admit it. Meet him more than halfway."

During the drive back to Baytown, Mason said little. He had time to consider what Erin had told him. Getting close to home, he picked up her theme as if she had just finished speaking. "He's trapped in that little store. He must have had dreams. Any failure on my part is bound to bring him down."

"Even so, be honest with him. Let's take him to dinner. Tell him what happened."

"The whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"Within reason," Erin said, and they had their first laugh in quite a while.

It seemed to do something for Al Mason, being settled in over white linen at the Coronet. Candlelight put a glow on the tired face as he sipped his wine. He kept letting the staff know he was being entertained by his son and this pretty young woman.

After soup, Jimmy opened up about why he attended the Montreal training camp. Why he gave it a shot. "I was this close, Dad." He held his fingers almost touching.

"Was Etcheverry there? Did he throw you the ball?"

"Sure he did. I caught a couple of long ones." It was a lie. The first-string quarterback spent his time with the established players. "But they didn't need me. It came down to that."

"It's okay, son. We need you."

With the second bottle of wine, Mason opened up more. He found himself talking about the badger game. Erin's face was neutral, so he went on. "We were desperate, Dad. The money was all gone. I got this idea to rip off guys in the bar."

The old man stopped eating as his son told the story. He was intensely interested. His eyes closed and opened slowly when the man with the gun turned the tables. He made no comment after Jimmy finished. He straightened cutlery on the tablecloth, cleared his throat, and said,

"Let me tell you what happened to me. This was back in nineteen forty-five, after the war ended. We were being demobilized, coming home." Al Mason had been an infantryman in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. With so many being killed, he made it through without a scratch. They sailed back home across a peaceful North Atlantic, docking at Halifax, traveling the rest of the way by train.

"On the ship," he said, "there were continuous poker games. Guys came and went, lost their money. A few big winners had thousands. I bet small, I was okay. Mostly, I watched."

"I never heard any of this," Mason told Erin.

His father described a man from Montreal, the Royal 22nd, the Van-Doos. His name was Charlebois. Maybe he was cheating, maybe he was lucky. But he had \$20,000 in his moneybelt when he left the game. He claimed he was sick and it turned out he was. Al Mason followed him when he stumbled aft, looking for a place to hang over the rail.

"Oh, that whisky. I drank too much," he told me. 'I have to get rid of it.' We found a place at the stern where he could lean across a low rail. The moneybelt was constricting his belly. He took it off and passed it to me. 'Hold this,' he said."

The young people listened in silence.

"Charlebois was hanging over the rail. He began to spasm. Maybe it was alcohol poisoning—he'd been drinking continuously. He lost his balance and fell forward. His hands were still on the rail. He ended up hanging there in the wind, in the dark. I can still see his face peering up at me. Like he hardly knew what was happening to him."

Erin murmured, "Good Lord."

"He let go with one hand and reached for me. I took his hand and wrist with both my hands. Then he let go with the other one and grabbed my sleeve. Neither of us yelled. He's hanging

from me and he is so heavy. And I'm sorry, son. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Dad."

"I peeled him off. That's what I did. I can't say if I was thinking of the money. But I bent his fingers loose of my wrist. He didn't resist very long. He let go and dropped down into the ocean. Maybe the propellers got him. Anyway, he was gone."

"He might have pulled you with him. It wasn't your fault." But Mason knew his father could have called for others to help him. What a sin to have to live with.

"I put the moneybelt on under my tunic. I went back to where we slept and said nothing. Charlebois was listed missing. I was questioned, but not much. It was figured he went over the side. He wasn't the only one. There were a lot of soldiers on that ship."

Erin said, "Did you tell this to anybody else?"

"Only Pauline. She was waiting for me the whole war. I told her. We got married and I used the money to buy the store and get started. Twenty grand was a lot in those days."

The waiter came and cleared away. They ordered coffee. When it was poured, Jimmy said, "It took courage for you to tell us what happened."

"Same goes for you, son. That was brave. The Masons are brave men. We just have this minor fault. We tend to steal other people's money."

Erin waited for Jimmy to respond. When he did not, she said, "I don't want to hear you say that ever again, Mr. Mason."

"He's right, Erin."

"You can't sum up anybody by one thing they've done," she said. "Anyway, we can't change the past."

When the check came and his son paid it, the old man said, "I can't run that store anymore. It's too much for me."

"You want to sell it?"

"I want you to come and take over. We can be a team."

Mason thought about it. It looked as if he was going to end up behind the counter of a sporting goods store. Maybe this was what he deserved. "Thanks, Dad," he said. "I'd like that."

They left the Coronet Hotel and began walking home, up the hill past the church. Scuffling through fallen leaves, Erin was saying something about the smell of autumn.

But all Mason could think about was the soldier, Charlebois, floundering in the cold Atlantic while the troopship moved away from him into the dark. ●

Art by Steve Cavallo



LET'S HAVE SOME FUN

by Helen Tucker

He was bored clean out of his gourd. Might as well have been at school, except that he woulda been even more bored there. He'd cut out of geometry class at nine-thirty this morning (faked a coughing fit and walked right out), taken care of his business by one P.M., and spent the first part of the afternoon amusing himself at the arcade with video games (which, after the first five minutes, were nothing but boring kid stuff), and at the Pizza Palace, where he'd had a deluxe for lunch, and then went to the Adult Screening Room with his bogus ID card (what the hell, he looked twenty-one anyhow) where he watched men and women do all sorts of kinky, unimaginable things. At least he couldn't imagine a girl ever doing those things with him.

Now it was only three-thirty and he was dying of clotted boredom. Maybe he should start taking care of his business in the afternoons instead of mornings, but that would mean staying in

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school an extra half day. He only skipped one day every two weeks, so what the hell. Next year he wouldn't have to go at all; he'd be eighteen and his ma would have to lay off that bit about compulsory attendance and the truant officer. (In all his seventeen years, he'd never actually laid eyes on the creep.)

But he wasn't sure what he'd do with all the time he'd have then. He'd work one day a week instead of one every two weeks, but that would still leave six days a week to find something to do. Maybe he should expand his business. That would mean expanding the risks too, but what the hell. You gotta break a few eggs to make an omelet, right?

He was proud of his business, so proud that he wished he could talk about it, brag to just one person, even, about how creative he'd been in thinking it up and how professional he was in pursuing it.

He was into pharmaceuticals. At first he'd thought of it as the drug business, but the whole world, himself included, got bad vibes from the word "drugs," whereas the word "pharmaceuticals" had a certain class to it. What he did was, he'd check out of school around nine-thirty, go home (his ma worked days in the lunchroom at an elementary school so there was no problem with her being there to ask dumb questions), change from his jeans to a pair of slacks, white shirt, tie, and jacket, and then start hitting the stores at all the shopping centers and even some downtown. At first he'd gone only to drugstores, and then it dawned on him that almost every store of any kind had one or more counters where nonprescription drugs were sold. So he went from store to store filling his pockets and a medium-sized shopping bag with cough drops, aspirin, cold remedies, laxatives,

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ear and eye drops, diet pills, antacids, vitamins, anything and everything that went by the name of medicine. Before leaving each store, he'd make a small purchase so as not to arouse suspicion. And, of course, being neatly dressed the way he was and looking the way he did—dark brown hair neatly combed and parted at the side, steady brown eyes that never flinched under any gaze, erect bearing—well, who'd suspect a fine young man like that of boosting the place?

From the stores, he'd go home again, transfer the goodies to a black briefcase that looked not unlike an old-fashioned doctor's bag, then go across the street to the apartment complex (which was a housing project for lower-income people) and sell his wares at half price. The way he looked at it, he was helping those poor people, plus making a tidy little piece of change for himself—and not hurting any merchants, really, because they probably didn't even miss the few boxes and bottles he took from each store.

Yeah, he was proud of his business. Everything went smooth as glass, usually. But this morning there had been a little hassle. He'd knocked on the door of old Miz Larkin's apartment and instead of Miz Larkin a much younger woman, maybe thirty, thirty-five, opened the door. She had red hair, a heart-shaped face, and gray eyes that bored into him like laser beams. She wore black tore-dor pants; a tight red sweater that clashed with her hair, and a why-the-hell-are-you-bothering-me expression on her face.

"Yes?"

"Where's Miz Larkin?"

"I don't know anyone by that name. You have the wrong apartment." She started to close the door.

"She's lived right here in this apartment for years."

"Well, she doesn't anymore. I moved in last week."

Miz Larkin musta died or gone to a nursing home. Sure enough, there was another name in the little name box beside the door: Liza Hanley. So, what the hell, maybe here was a potential customer. "Let me introduce myself," he said quickly. "I represent the Judson P. Mallard Wholesale Pharmaceutical Company, and I come by every two weeks as a favor to the people who live here and sell them what they need at a greatly reduced price."

She looked interested for about two seconds and then she looked like she was sizing him up and he was coming up about

two feet shorter than his actual five-eight. "You into drugs?" she asked.

"Goodness gracious no!" He almost said something else, but caught himself just in time. "I sell over-the-counter stuff wholesale. Practically everybody in this building is a good customer of mine."

"Over-the-counter stuff that you sneaked over the counter and out of the store, I'll bet. Bug off, kid. I don't do drugs of any kind, so don't bother me again."

"Just let me show you what I have, and . . ." But she had slammed the door and he was talking to himself. "Bitch!" he yelled. "Goddam stupid bitch!"

This morning had been the exception; nothing like that had ever happened before. Right now, what he had to think about was a way to kill time. No reason to go home—three hours before supper. He was tired of the mall and that street on the edge of town known as Porno Strip, and he'd seen all the movies at Cinema 7 except the Disney thing that he wouldn't be caught dead in. Hanging out at the mall was for kids, not for executive types like himself, the enterprising Judson P. Mallard.

He was leaning against the open door of a video shop and for a second he thought about going in and lifting a CD or two, but what the hell. He couldn't think of anything he really wanted, and he had long since passed through the phase of filching just for practice. He looked down at the newspaper box beside him just as a man dropped in two quarters and took out a paper. Involuntarily, he caught the rack before it swung back up, and took out a paper himself. He'd take it home to Ma. Maybe that would keep her from hassling him about what he'd been doing that afternoon, why he hadn't taken out the garbage that morning, why he hadn't made his bed, and didn't he have some homework he should be doing.

He had just started walking toward the mall's center door when he heard his name called.

"Hey, Jud, how'd you get here so quick after school?" It was Kenny Byers, a good buddy who lived around the corner from Jud.

"I been here awhile," he said.

"You cut out early?"

"Early enough."

"Wanta go down to the arcade?"

"Kee-rist no! And I don't want to go to the Tiny Tots Shop either."

Kenny gave him a funny look, like maybe he was river rafting on a skateboard. Kenny was a funny guy in some ways. Light hair and blue eyes, looked younger than his seventeen years, never had any ideas of his own, but was willing enough to listen to those of others. But he was an okay guy, trustworthy. Jud gave sudden thought to letting Kenny in on The Business. Maybe when he decided to expand, he'd even take Kenny in as a partner. With that innocent baby face, he should be able to lift half a store without anyone suspecting him.

"Oh, I get it," Kenny said finally. "You think the arcade is for tots. I just thought maybe . . ." But a headline in the newspaper Jud was holding caught his eye. "No Clues in the Blue Ribbon Killings," he read out loud.

"You better believe," Jud said. "They'll never catch that turkey." He held the paper out so they could both read the latest about what had turned out to be a serial killer in their city.

Extra police patrols from 9 P.M. until 6 A.M. will be put on throughout the city, starting immediately, Chief of Police Thomas A. Malloy announced today. He said as yet there are no leads in the Blue Ribbon murder cases and he advised women not to go out alone at night.

So far four women have been murdered by strangulation in the past three weeks and police are certain it is the work of a serial killer. Two of the bodies were found in Delancy Park, one was found on the sidewalk near the Northside Mall, and one in the parking lot of the Barlow Professional Building.

All four women were killed between the hours of 10 P.M. and 5 A.M., according to the coroner's report. All were between the ages of 29 and 35, all had red hair, and all had a blue ribbon tied in a bow around the neck. . . .

"Why d'you think the blue ribbon?" Kenny looked up from the paper.

"Killer was being patriotic," Jud said.

"Huh?"

"Don'tcha see? They were all white women with red hair so the killer added the blue ribbon." He thought about it for a minute. "Or maybe they got the blue ribbon for winning first prize."

"First prize for what?"

“Dying.”

Kenny looked undecided about this, but he nodded anyway. He was not, Jud knew, one to argue a point. All the more reason why he'd make a good partner in the business, but first he would have to be tested. Jud had to be absolutely sure before he brought someone else in on his bonanza. For instance, if Kenny had been selling this morning and run into that Hanley woman, it might have discouraged him from knocking on another door.

That bitch was something else. The idea! Slamming the door in his face like that. She needed to be taught a lesson.

He folded the paper and put it under his arm. “Hey, Ken, I’ve got one neat-o, sweet-o idea. It beats the hell out of hanging out at the mall.” The more he thought about it, the better he liked the idea. It was absolutely perfect; he could kill not two but three robins with one rock: get even with that idiot woman, test Kenny, and put an end to boredom. He grinned hugely and said, “Listen, Ken, my man, let’s have some fun.”

When it first dawned on her that she was being followed—stalked, actually—she wasn’t sure how long it had been going on. Last Saturday evening when she’d left the corner deli, she’d had a feeling that someone was behind her, but when she turned around, she saw only two boys standing near the curb engaged in what appeared to be a heated conversation. Then late Sunday, at twilight, when she couldn’t stand the drab little apartment another minute, she’d gone to the nearby park and sat on a bench by the miniature lake. Suddenly, she’d had the feeling that someone was staring at her and she turned quickly and looked down the paved path. A young man was standing there, but he was not staring. He had his back turned to her and appeared to be looking at something up a tree.

On Monday night she’d bought groceries and walked back to the apartment complex, hurrying because she didn’t like being out on the street after dark, especially after reading about the Blue Ribbon murders in the newspaper. She reached her building safely, but after she was inside and had passed the turn of the first landing on the stairs, she heard the footsteps of someone coming up behind her. She stopped and the footsteps stopped. She started climbing again and the footsteps resumed. This happened twice, and then she began to run up the steps. The pace of the footsteps increased also. By the time she reached her floor,

the third, she was panting and panicked. She fumbled in her purse for her key, dropping the purse and spilling its contents on the floor along with the bag of groceries. She picked up the key, opened the door, and hurried inside, leaving everything on the floor outside.

She locked and bolted the door, then looked through the peephole, expecting to see some menacing creature at any second. But no one appeared. After a few minutes, she opened the door quietly and picked up her purse and the groceries, looking up and down the hall as she did. The hall was deserted and quiet. For that matter, the place was always quiet. The residents of this part of the project were mostly people five years older than God, and except for a slight shuffling sound in their walk, they didn't make any noise.

She couldn't wait to get away from here, from this shabby building, dreary apartment, and tenants who sent her into a depression every time she saw them . . . which wasn't too often because, for her own safety, she knew she had to avoid people right now.

It was last night that she finally figured out that what had been happening was no coincidence: She was being stalked.

There was a drugstore on the corner across from the deli, and she had gone there to get some magazines because she couldn't stand looking at the stupid tube another minute. It was dark as pitch outside: no moon, no stars, lowering black clouds, and dim streetlights only at the corners. She walked as fast as she could without running. She wanted to run, but she didn't dare, for that would call attention to herself, and the last thing she wanted right now was to be noticed. She *hated* it that she couldn't go out during the day, but she knew that for her own safety she had to stay out of sight until she settled on what to do next. Her husband would kill her if he found her. That was not a speculation or a fantasy but a cold, hard fact. Nothing aroused his monumental temper like being taken . . . and she had just taken him for nearly five hundred grand.

She made it to the drugstore without incident, picked out several magazines, some perfumed bath soap, and a bottle of aspirin, merely nodded when the cashier, a fat young girl, tried to be friendly, and started back to her apartment.

She had gone no more than half a block when the bushes along the edge of the sidewalk began to move, as though someone on

the other side was dragging a stick through them. But of course it was too dark to see anything or anybody. She walked faster and faster, but the bushes continued to sway right beside her. Someone was keeping up with her. At the corner the streetlight on her side apparently had burned out because the only light came from the very dim light pole across the street.

She had to pause to look at the stoplight, and when she did, a hand extended from the bushes, and in that hand was a club—a baseball bat, maybe; she didn't wait to get a second look—and it was poised, ready to strike her.

She bolted across the street against the light, unmindful of honking horns and shouted epithets, and she didn't stop running until she was safely back in her apartment with the door locked, bolted, and a chair placed under the knob.

But was she really safe here? Now that he knew where she lived?

It was not the Blue Ribbon murderer who was after her; her husband had found her and had hired someone to terrorize and then kill her. That was the way Stan was. He would never settle for a simple killing; he'd want her to suffer first, suffer terribly, mentally and physically.

Of her three husbands, he had by far the worst temper. Joe had been a sort of pussycat, and when she'd skipped out on him after cleaning out their joint bank accounts, she could imagine him shrugging and saying to a friend, "If that's the kind she was, I'm well rid of her." Her take amounted only to a little more than fifty thousand, however.

She moved to another town and married Ralph without bothering to divorce Joe because she was afraid if Joe found out where she was, he would try to make her pay back the money.

She did better when she left Ralph. She had the money from the bank accounts, almost a hundred grand, plus the valuable pieces of jewelry that had belonged to his mother. He had told her the jewelry would be given to her piece by piece on birthdays, anniversaries, and other special occasions—so if it was to be hers eventually, why not take it now? She went to New York, sold the jewelry before it could be reported stolen, then went to a Southern city to live.

She married Stan two months after she met him. No one could ever accuse her of not recognizing a good thing when she saw it. Stan was loaded, a new widower, and, therefore, vulnerable

to the charms and company of a good-looking, sympathetic young woman.

Naturally, there had been no divorce from Ralph. But there had been several name changes along the way. Her name at birth had been Elizabeth Ann Hensdale; Betty Dale when she married Joe; Ann Hensley when she married Ralph; Beth Daily when she married Stan; now she was Liza Hanley. She had always liked the name Liza and she decided that this was the name she'd keep. Anyway, with her last haul, she wouldn't have to get married again anytime soon, although she certainly had made a success of her marriages during the short time they lasted. All three husbands had adored her.

"Baby," Stan had said to her once, "I couldn't live without you. If you ever left me, I'd search to the ends of the earth to find you."

And he would, too. That was why she was so sure it was Stan's hit man and not the Blue Ribbon murderer who was after her.

It came to her when she had been planning her getaway that Stan would have detectives looking for her in every major city in the country and even quite a few outside the country . . . and that the last place he would expect her to be was right here in the same city. So she bought old clothes from the Salvation Army store, dyed her dark hair red, gave a sob story to the manager of the housing project for people of lower incomes, and moved in. Knowing her love of fine things like good jewelry, beautiful, expensive clothes, deluxe hotels, and plenty of servants, Stan would never in his wildest dreams picture her living the way she did now. She had planned to stay here two or three months and then take off for Mexico or the Bahamas or Canada, somewhere she didn't need a passport.

She thought she had the perfect plan, but somehow he had found her, and there was nothing she could do about it. Obviously, she couldn't go to the police, and it wouldn't do any good to move, because if Stan could find her here, he could find her anywhere.

She went into her minuscule bedroom and took off the uneven plaid skirt and faded blouse and threw them in the corner in a pile of the rest of the ratty-looking clothes she wore when she went outside. From the closet she took red satin lounging pajamas and from a jewelry box hidden behind a laundry bag she took a heavy gold chain and matching earrings. With this change

of attire, she felt more like herself, more the way a girl named Liza Hanley should feel.

No one had seen her dressed in her real clothes since she came here . . . except for that stupid kid who had come by peddling drugs or something. She had opened the door that day without looking through the peephole first because she had been expecting the super to come to open a clogged drain.

For a moment she wondered if perhaps that boy with the drugs was in Stan's employ and had been on a scouting expedition. After all, it was right after he saw her that the stalking began. But no, she had heard him knocking on other doors along the hall and talking to the old people right after he left her door.

How the devil had Stan found her? She had been so careful, so extremely cautious about every move she made. And when was he, or his henchman, going to make the final move? Obviously, she was to be tormented and terrorized for a while, but for how long?

She sank down in a chair by the window that looked out on the brick wall of the adjoining building of the project. She would have to leave this place as soon as possible. She was not going to stay here and let Stan take her out of what had proved to be a false haven the way he would pull a mangled mouse out of a trap.

No matter where she went, he would find her, but maybe by leaving, she could buy a little time. At least enough time to come up with a better idea, a better plan, for a permanent escape from him.

She slept hardly at all that night, and the couple of times she did manage to drift off, she had dreadful dreams about her three husbands. They were having a meeting to decide whether to kill her or turn her over to police and see that she spent the rest of her life in prison. Ralph, holding his sides to keep them from splitting with laughter, said, "I opt for the latter. Having to wear a drab uniform just like a hundred or so other women, no jewelry, no hair stylist, no servants, no gourmet food, and *work* to do—my God, that's the worst punishment *anyone* could wish her."

Stan, his expression deadly serious, said, "I don't want her defiling the world, polluting the air just by breathing her corrupt breath. Death is the only way to rid the world of scum like that."

Joe looked from one to the other and finally said, "I thought I was a better judge of character. I admit she had me fooled."

She woke up, all but swimming in perspiration.

At nine o'clock the following morning, Saturday, she left the apartment dressed in a lavender suede suit and wearing her good gold jewelry. Now that Stan had found her and she would be leaving the project, there was no point in wearing those atrocious poverty-declaring clothes any longer. She was going to a travel agency to get a plane ticket for, and book hotel reservations in, Nassau. As soon as she got to Nassau, she would leave by another airline, or ferry boat or ship if she could find such, for a more remote island in the Bahamas. She would keep moving as long as necessary.

She had planned it all out during the long, long night. It probably was not the perfect plan (there was no such thing; look what had happened to her recent "perfect" plan), but it was the best she could do until she was out of the country and in a more relaxed frame of mind.

It took less time than she had thought it would. There was no direct flight to Nassau tomorrow, but on Monday there was. The travel agent made reservations for her at a hotel on Paradise Island, little knowing that what she was going to do was take a cab from the airport to the hotel, go through the hotel and out another exit, get another cab, and head back to the airport. She would decide where to go next from there.

She felt much better as she walked back to her apartment in the project. Two more nights. If she could manage to get through two more nights, she'd be out of here!

A warm breeze of false spring tousled her red hair, blowing long strands across her forehead. She almost laughed out loud, picturing herself on a white sand beach, wearing a gorgeous new designer bathing suit and coverup (so the tropical sun wouldn't leave her pale, translucent skin blotched and ugly), in her hand a tall, fruity drink liberally mixed with gin which she sipped while gazing languidly at the patchwork blue-green Caribbean Sea. Maybe it was just as well that Stan had found her; at least it gave her a reason to leave that damn dismal project.

She looked both ways before entering the apartment building, but there was no one in sight except an elderly couple, each with a cane and leaning on each other, walking toward the corner

deli. She certainly could manage two more nights; it would be a breeze, a warm, perfumed Caribbean breeze.

She hesitated only momentarily as she reached the first landing of the stairs, then went up the other two flights. She was digging in her shoulder bag for her key when she looked down at the door and saw the paper stuck by Scotch tape to the knob. Printed in pencil in large letters was one word: GOTCHA!

Oh man! It was all so cool, so well planned. He hadn't had this much fun since . . . well, maybe not ever. And Kenny was shaping up just great. Between the two of them they'd managed to scare that broad out of her frigging mind. It made him laugh every time he thought about the night he had followed her up the stairs, stopping when she stopped, moving again when she moved. She'd run into that apartment like the devil was after her with a poisoned pitchfork. His only regret was that he hadn't been able to see her face today when she read the GOTCHA! he'd left on the door.

Kenny had been a little skittish at first, but lately he'd joined right in and seemed to be enjoying it as much as Jud. That night they followed her along the sidewalk, Kenny with the big stick shaking the bushes, then, at the corner, Jud with the baseball bat like he was going to flatten her right there on the sidewalk . . . it was all Jud could do to keep from laughing his damn head off every time he thought about it.

But tonight was the big night. Leaving the GOTCHA! note was only the beginning. Tonight he and Kenny would come back and scare her so bad that when he came around selling antacids and drugs to calm her jangled nerves, she'd buy every damn thing he had in his satchel, and she'd be sweet as pie. No more of that bug-off-kid business. Nobody treated Judson P. Mallard like a piece of garbage and got away with it.

He had worked on the plan for days now, perfecting it down to the minutest detail. The GOTCHA! was to make her think the Blue Ribbon murderer knew where she was and could come back to get her at any time. Tonight, about eleven, he and Kenny would go to the building for what he had come to think of as The Big Finish. Kenny hadn't cottoned much to the idea when Jud first told him about it, but Jud had said, "Ken, my man, don't you want to have any *fun*?" and then he had explained it all in more detail, and Kenny was okay.

What they were going to do was, Kenny would go up the fire escape outside her apartment and rattle a window to make her think somebody was breaking in. She'd get the hell out of there as fast as she could and Jud would be waiting in the hall, a stocking over his head and a big blue ribbon in his hand. This would make her go running clean out of the building, probably up the street screaming and hollering, and while she was carrying on like crazy, he'd leave the building, meet Kenny at the corner, and the two of them would have a pluperfect fit from laughing so hard. And the broad? She'd probably find a cop who'd go with her back to the building, up to her apartment, and see that there was nothing disturbed, nothing missing or even out of place, and no one had broken in. The cop would think she was just one more crazy dame trying to get a man's attention.

All afternoon he was agog with anticipation, chortling every time he pictured that dippy dame rushing down the street yelling like crazy. And that's just what everybody would think she was, crazy as hell.

He met Kenny in front of the project at five minutes to eleven, having slipped out of his house across the street. He had tiptoed past his ma's bedroom even though there was no need to be quiet. Once she was asleep, the final trumpet at judgment wouldn't wake her up, as she was always saying—just like she was bragging about some fantastic accomplishment.

"Listen, Jud, I've been thinking . . ." Kenny began.

But Jud knew exactly what Kenny had been thinking and interrupted. "*You* listen, Kenny. This is gonna be the most fun you ever had. *Believe* me! You just wait. It'll be something to tell your grandchildren about."

"I don't know. I don't want to get in trouble." Kenny stopped dead still on the sidewalk and looked hesitantly at the apartment building. "What we've been doing, well, that was sort of like a joke, a practical joke, but this . . ."

"Hell, man, this is no different. It's all just a joke. Funny as hell. You won't get in trouble, I promise. Who the hell is gonna know about it anyhow? Just you and me. It'll be our little secret, our joke." He took Kenny's arm and steered him around the corner to the rear of the building. Walked him right up to the fire escape and waited until Kenny had started slowly up. "Now count to one hundred before you start rattling her window."

"Jud, I just don't know . . ." Kenny stopped on the third rung of the escape.

"Cheese and crackers got all muddy!" Jud gave a big laugh to make Kenny think the fun had already started. "Don't be such a goddam idiot. I got plans for you, pal. I'm planning to let you in on a business deal that'll make you more money than you know how to count. But if you're going to chicken out of this before . . ."

"Okay, okay!" Kenny started climbing again.

"Remember, count to one hundred," Jud said. He went back around the building to the front door.

This place might as well have been deserted for all the people you ever saw in here, he thought as he started up the first flight. But, hell, it was eleven o'clock and all the old folks had been in bed for hours. So how come that young broad lived here? She didn't fit in at all.

Up the second flight and then he was in the hall beside her door. He took the stocking out of his pocket and put it over his head, then checked to be sure the blue ribbon was still in his other pocket. He'd wait until she was outside and looking right at him before he pulled it out and scared the bejesus out of her.

He waited and waited. What the hell was wrong with Kenny? He could've counted to *two* hundred by now. And then, finally, he heard a faint noise, a slight commotion, inside the apartment. Like somebody knocking. Louder now. Kenny was knocking on the goddam windowpane. What if he broke the glass and got charged with breaking and attempting to enter? Didn't that guy have *any* common sense? He had told him expressly just to rattle the window.

But wait . . . something else was going on. Movement inside now. She musta been asleep and Kenny woke her up because Jud heard footsteps coming closer. Yeah, man, this was it! Any second now she'd come busting through the door, take one look at him with the stocking over his head and blue ribbon in his hand, and start hollering her head off.

More knocking inside, and then for a few seconds, silence. He held his breath. He could feel his heart going thumpy-thump, thumpy-thump. It was saying, Hurry UP! Hurry UP!

The door opened so suddenly that it startled him. He had stepped aside, reaching in his pocket for the ribbon, when she rushed out. She was wearing only a long, lacy nightgown and

she was barefooted as a yard dog. She wasn't screaming and she didn't even look his way, but she was running down the hall to the stairs, and her head disappeared from sight as she went down to the first landing.

"You goddam bitch!" he yelled. "Goddam stupid bitch!"

He heard the big front door of the building open and close as she went out. Slowly, he followed. Maybe it hadn't been entirely a failure just because she hadn't seen him and wasn't screaming. She was sure as hell scared.

He started smiling. One thing he hadn't counted on was her coming out in nothing but a nightgown. Man, that was neat. Wait'll old Kenny got a gander at those big boobs under that blue lace. His eyes would bug out of his baby face.

He took off the stocking and put it in his pocket and went downstairs, taking his time about it. Didn't want to get out on the street too soon. Give her time to get a block or so away.

Just as he was opening the front door, he heard what he had been expecting earlier, a long, terrified and terrifying, ear-piercing scream. And then . . . nothing.

He paused for a minute or two with the door ajar, then he peeped around, looking both ways, but he couldn't see her anywhere. She musta gone on down the street. Barefoot, she wouldn't be making any noise running.

He was out on the sidewalk before he saw her. She was lying half on the sidewalk, half in the street, her head resting on the curb like it was a pillow. Jee-zuss, wouldn't you know. Fell and hit her head and stunned herself or maybe even knocked herself out.

He approached her slowly, expecting her to sit up at any second, jump up and start running again. But she didn't. She just lay there, still as a corpse. He stopped beside her and looked, but in the dim light from the nearby pole he couldn't tell anything. He put his head down to see if she was breathing, and just as he did he was in a circle of bright light, so bright that he couldn't see what was on the other side of the light.

He rose, put his head down, and started running, and then the first thought that went through his mind was: What the hell, are you some kind of idiot, running away? Worst thing you could do. He turned around, ready to say he had been a concerned citizen who had been taking a late night stroll and just happened to come upon that unconscious woman.

"Hold it right there or I'll shoot!"

But he had stopped before the command was issued and was walking slowly back to the curb.

"Put your hands behind your head and come over here."

"Look, officer, I . . ."

There were two cops, one holding a gun on him, the other kneeling beside the broad. "She's dead, Murph," said the one kneeling.

"I-was-just-out-walking-and-saw-her-on-the-street-and-I-was-trying-to-see-if-I-could-do-anything-for-her-when-you-came-up-and-I-thought-you-were-whomever-hit-her-and . . ." He was talking so fast that his words were running together.

"Spread 'em right here beside the car." The one with the gun didn't seem to be listening to a word he was saying.

He was frisked like he was some ordinary common criminal. "You don't know what you're doing," he complained. "I didn't do anything except try to help her."

The cop grunted.

Kenny! Kenny could tell them he didn't do anything. "Look," he began, glancing toward the side of the building. "A buddy of mine is here, he can tell you I didn't . . ." But even as he was speaking he saw a shadowy form start around the building, hesitate, and then take off like an Olympic racer.

"Kenny, wait!" he yelled. But Kenny was out of sight. Gone.

The cop in the cruiser was saying something into a staticky radio. Jud started to lower his arms, but the cop behind him jerked them back up, and then he reached into Jud's right-hand pants pocket.

"Well, looka here," he said, pulling out the stocking and throwing it on the hood of the cruiser.

Into the other pocket then and out came the blue ribbon.

The cop sucked his breath in so hard that it sounded like the beginning of a tornadic wind.

Jud watched as he threw the ribbon on the hood beside the stocking. "I didn't hurt her. I swear to God I didn't do it. Listen, man, I told you, I was trying to help her . . ."

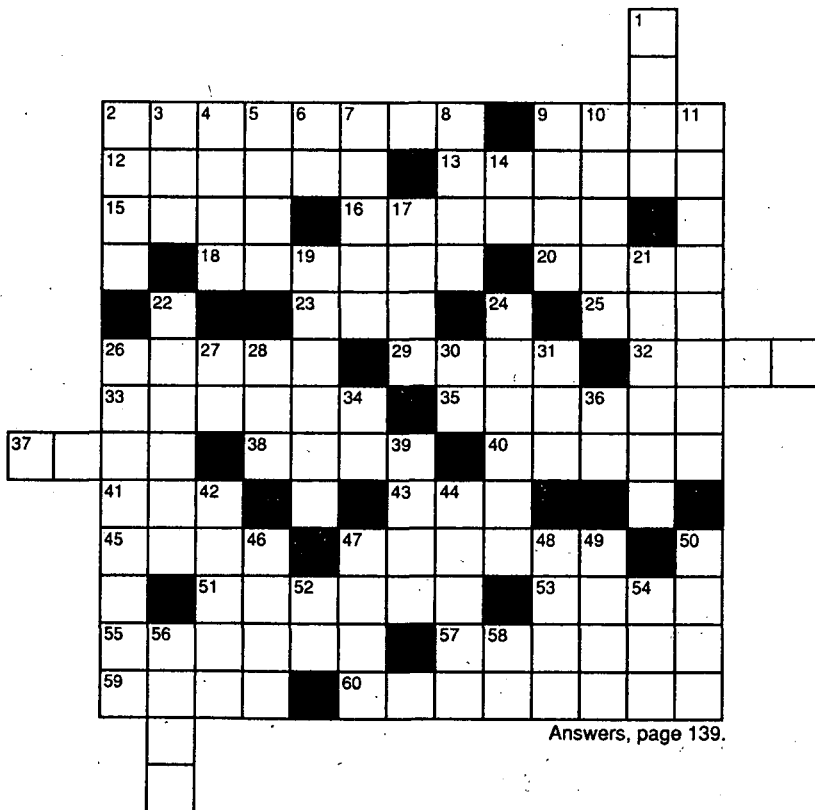
"Tony," the cop called to the one in the car, "tell the desk sarge to call the chief's house and get him down to the station. We're bringing in the Blue Ribbon murderer. Caught him just as he was about to tie the ribbon around his latest victim's neck." ●

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Handle(s) with Care

A Painless Diversion in Deduction

by "Milton"



Answers, page 139.

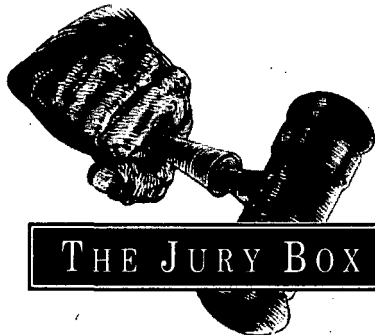
Note: An italicized pronoun in a clue means the answer is a first name.

ACROSS

- 2 She sounds like she's in for a long grind
9 Will *her* detective make you go all dewy-eyed?
12 X marks *her* spot
13 File this caper under "Odd" — almost!
15 I think of *her* mansion as Irish
16 Maybe *he* spies things we don't
18 *His* Yellow Brick Road keeps taking us to Red Square
20 Scot, neighbor of the Normans
23 A letter from Athens
25 This noise is something to crow about
26 Put these bugs on the "take" if you need money
29 She's 1/3 of a detecting team — if you count the dog
32 As you see, these project
33 A veritable goddess who never minded a bit of bull
- 35 Thank heaven he introduced us to Hildegard, not Kierkegaard
37 Listen, these stick out, too
38 His cups are numbered . . . hic!
40 Tired, weary — seen it all before
41 There's a bookful of evidence that he's been on a hunt recently
43 *Death* — *Distant Land*: 2 wds.
45 " — any good mysteries lately?"
47 She was Big in Dorothy Parker's tale
51 A top-drawer detective, *his* favorite haunts are hotel rooms
53 Though unprovable in court, this scribe sounds a bit of a toff
55 Canadian who handed out post-natal cigars five at a time
57 *His* hero was an instant knockout
59 Some ledgers can give you a hidden advantage
60 This *lady* found silver in them thar hills, not gold

DOWN

- 1 Sticks out like this
2 The original Damsel in Distress?
3 Parisian squeeze
4 Sheep from Los Angeles
5 Don't let this pest bug you
6 Commercial
7 Inspector Ghote's favorite songs?
8 An (un)civil wrong
9 Briny source of iodine
10 Like Tracy says, this gives you a clue to where the fish are
11 Direction contrary to Sir Walter's injunction
14 18-Across's hero says yes to this legal beagle
17 Not a disgruntled reviewer, but another wet old sod
19 Mixed up pinups make a welcome move in the market
21 Here's a tip to give you a bad turn!
22 Washed-up sleuth?
24 He was almost a horse, was old Marcus Ulpius
26 What *she* wrote was a mystery, though she never rose to whodunits, whodunits, whodunits
- 27 Ancient city found in crosswords
28 Dizzy type of jazz, man
30 Private eye who once belonged to a large land mass
31 Sorta with, like: 2 wds.
33 Be early
35 If Watson's around, there is one in the house
39 Catch *his* moniker if you're over 22
42 Half of the old double act found in an imago, gold and red
44 Dangerous church music?
46 Break bread with this master of crime writing
47 Something you talk after
48 A place other than barracks to find cheesecake
49 He won't mind a stroll after a hard day's writing
50 A big cheese in the Agora
52 Don't come acr.
54 It's the law in Brussels
56 Same thing again
58 The first signs of Last Rites



THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Australian detective fiction has had a long and often distinguished history. Fergus Hume's 1886 bestseller *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was set in Melbourne. Arthur W. Upfield's long series about half-caste Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte extended from the late twenties through the middle sixties and made memorable use of its outback setting. Carter Brown (Alan G. Yates [1923-1985]) was one of the most successful producers of ersatz American private eye fiction. A. E. Martin, Margot Neville, Pat Flower, S. H. Courtier, and Jon Cleary were other Aussies to appear with a greater or lesser degree of success in the American market. (If you're wondering, New Zealander Ngaio Marsh doesn't count as Australian.)

The best brief history I know of Australian detective fiction

appears as Stephen Knight's introduction to *Dead Witness* (Penguin), an anthology published in Australia but distributed throughout the English-speaking world in 1989. The two writers Knight chose to represent contemporary Down Under practitioners of mystery fiction, Peter Corris and Jennifer Rowe, have several other things in common: Each was born in the 1940s and made a mystery writing debut in the '80s; each had an editorial-journalistic background; each presents a very familiar variant of the fictional detective (tough private-eye and classical amateur sleuth respectively); and each first appeared in the U.S.A. in paperback original, moved into hardcover as part of Doubleday's short-lived Perfect Crime line, and is now back to paperback.

*** Peter Corris, *Beware of the*

Dog, Dell, \$4.99. Sydney private eye Cliff Hardy has just given a guest lecture on his profession to a college class when he is asked for an interview by Paula Wilberforce, a persistent young graduate student working on her thesis. Once again in the world of the shamus, women are trouble. Corris delivers the traditional gumshoe goods: One scene enjoyably (and I'm sure deliberately) recalls the opening chapter of *The Big Sleep*. (Though Corris has been published in the United States since the mid-'80s, his current publisher persists in pretending 1994's *Matrimonial Causes* was his U.S. debut.)

*** Jennifer Rowe: *Stranglehold*, Bantam, \$4.99. When radio personality Max Tully uses his seventieth birthday party to announce both his retirement from the airwaves and his engagement to his young Vietnamese housekeeper, his friends and family are thrown into a tailspin and murder results. Series sleuth Verity Birdwood, the daughter of his radio employer, naturally winds up on the case. As we've pointed out before, the tag "Australian Agatha Christie" isn't the usual empty publicity hype. Rowe's mastery of the pure whodunit really should delight those who have read their way through the whole

Christie canon and want more of the same. Rowe shares with Christie a devotion to the Least Suspected Person that really fools the reader, as well as an ability to make her suspects, if not deeply characterized, vivid and individual. Finally, it is easy to imagine Rowe's novel as a successful stage play.

**** Marcia Muller: *The McCone Files*, Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, Va 23505; \$38 hardcover signed limited, \$15 trade paperback. The second volume from this commendable new specialty publisher gathers all thirteen previously published stories about San Francisco private eye Sharon McCone; the first and last linked stories, depicting McCone's arrival at and departure from All Souls' Legal Cooperative as well as the case that bridges the two memorable occasions, appear here for the first time. Of the leading triumvirate of female private-eye authors (the others being Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky), Muller is the most skilled at the short story form, offering fully-plotted puzzles and a real feel for The City—see especially "Somewhere in the City," making effective fictional use of the 1989 earthquake. Attention serious collectors: According to publisher Douglas G. Greene, the hardcover "will be limited to

197 copies, some with a tipped-in page of galley proofs corrected in hand by the author."

*** Colin Dexter: *The Daughters of Cain*, Crown, \$21. Chief Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis investigate the murder of an Oxford don, whose death may have been related to an earlier college drug scandal. The novel is in many ways typical of the author/sleuth team: The aging Morse has a quasi-romantic involvement with a much younger character; each of the seventy chapters plus prologue and epilogue is headed with an apposite quotation, most from familiar authors and sources but others so obscure the reader may wonder if they are invented; Morse's cheapness and quirkiness, Lewis's patience and solidity seem more notable than ever; and a crossword puzzle clue ("Kick in the pants," eight letters) introduced in the opening pages is dazzlingly solved near the end.

** Bill Blum: *Prejudicial Error*, Dutton, \$21.95. California administrative law judge Blum is another addition to the swelling ranks of lawyer novelists. The alcoholic down-on-his-luck state of Los Angeles attorney John Solomon, reminiscent of the main characters of Barry Reed's *The Verdict* (1982) and Eleazar Lipsky's *The People Against*

O'Hara (1950) among other courtroom novels, is only the first of a series of very familiar story elements and devices, right down to the final whodunit revelation. Solomon's appointment as sacrificial lamb defender of a gang member accused of killing an undercover cop is engineered by an ambitious Assistant D.A. who spouts evangelical rhetoric. Blum has the ability to keep his story moving; future novels may carry more originality and believability.

The latest reprint in the Rex Stout Library is the 1939 novel *Double for Death* (Bantam, \$4.99), with an introduction by Rita Mae Brown. It is unusual in two respects: that it features Tecumseh Fox rather than Nero Wolfe will disappoint some readers, but its puzzle plot is superior to most if not all in the Wolfe series—Stout himself thought it "the best detective story, technically, that I ever wrote."

For the first encyclopedic work on crime fiction for the general reader since *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection* twenty years ago, latch onto William L. DeAndrea's *Encyclopedia Mysterosa* (Prentice Hall General Reference, \$27.50), recommended as much for its lively writing style and provocative opinions as for the considerable informational content.

DOING THINGS BACKWARDS

by Martin Naparstek

Backwards live to decided Efi.

Entertainment for a day: reason other no. Glancing over her shoulder, she walked backwards to the kitchen closet, reached behind herself, turned the knob, pulled open the door, reached back, grasped the handle of the vacuum cleaner, and pulled it out. She turned and pulled the vacuum in front of her as she backed into the living room.

Gone was husband her. Efi was the only person in the

house. The efficacious Dr. Jonathon Wstol, on sabbatical so he did not need to teach American History this year to students at the University of Northern Utah, had picked this week to climb one of the Wasatch Mountains; walk up it really—it was steep, but it didn't require equipment. And daughter Renee was in Los Angeles, making a movie; not starring in it, just walking around in the background looking pretty. Renee had inherited her prettiness from Jonathon, the dark, almost black hair, the deep blazing eyes, the high cheekbones; Jonathon looked like the Marlboro Man in a tweed jacket, and Renee looked like his daughter. Gone too was Jonathon, Jr., off to a private school in Rochester, New York: Allendale-Columbia, the same one Renee had graduated from.

Solitary was Efi.

Socket wall a into vacuum the plugged she. Vacuuming backwards cleaned the carpet as well as vacuuming forwards. Some

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things could clearly be done as well one way as the other. She was thirsty and tired, and although the day had not yet reached noon, she knew she wanted a glass of wine, cold white wine. She put the vacuum away and backed to the refrigerator. Reaching behind her, she felt around the top shelf. A wide plastic container: She knew that was milk; a narrower plastic container: orange juice; cans of Coke; but no tall bottle with a slim neck. To assure herself her hands had not lied, she turned and looked, and her eyes confirmed what her hands had told her: no wine. Of course not—Jonathon finished it four days ago, without offering her any. A sauterne from California, her favorite, and he kept the bottle on the table near his wing chair and filled his glass over and over. She hadn't said anything. For months, maybe a year, she had avoided talking to him unless it was absolutely necessary, something about the children, or the car needing repair, but beyond that, nothing.

Now days three for gone was Jonathon. He told her he was going to a point south of Logan, north of Brigham, and that he would take the Jeep up a dirt road that turned to rock, then ended. He would hike, he said, the first ten miles, camp overnight, go over the first mountain in the morning, and then challenge the second mountain, where no road reached, where, he hoped, no man had ever climbed. And on the top he would be two and a half miles higher than the Pacific Ocean a thousand miles to the west. The West, he said, had never been fully explored, and he wanted to visit places no man had visited. "Just like *Star Trek*," she said. "*Trek* *Star* like just," he said. Saying backwards what she had just said forwards was one of the things he thought made him cute. It was one of many things about him she had come to loathe.

She would buy wine. So what if noon had not yet arrived. The liquor store was only two blocks away. She put on her running suit, the loose-fitting sweats, and the \$125 sneakers, and she backed out the side door. She ran backwards, something she had never done before but which she had seen other runners do. Initially she felt odd, the way her toes touched the ground first and then her heel, just the opposite of running forwards. And the strain, slight, on her muscles was different. A few neighbors saw her and waved; Mrs. Romney smiled—it was a smile that seemed to humor Efi.

Small was store the. She backed through the front door when she was certain the clerk was not paying attention; at this hour in the morning, she was the only customer. She walked backwards to the sign that said California Whites, and she found the sauterne she wanted and took two bottles. She glanced around and when she saw the clerk, eyes fused to the TV—a talk show out of Salt Lake City—she backed to the counter. She stood with her back to the clerk, pretending to look around the store.

“Anything I can help you find, Mrs. Wstol?”

“No, Orrin, just admiring the wood shelves in here. I never really noticed them before.” She took money from her wallet, which had been tucked into her sweatpants’ elastic waist, and reached behind her and put it on the counter. He gave her change, and she reached back for the bottles; to her dismay, she saw he had put them in separate bags. She picked one up in each hand and backed to the front door, chatting with Orrin as she left. “Well, see you in a few days,” he said.

Reverse in trotted she, outside. Holding a bottle in each hand made the running awkward, but she was determined to arrive home without cheating. Mrs. Joyner, in the corner house, smirked in greeting, and Efi nodded up in return. Why, she wondered, did someone nod differently, with an upward motion, when moving backwards? She remembered, just two days ago, taking the station wagon into the body repair shop to have that small dent on the back bumper taken care of. The foreman asked her to back the wagon into the bay on the far left side. She nearly panicked. “I’m not backing this into anyplace,” she said with a sense of finality that surprised even her. She believed at that moment that backing the wagon into the bay, backing it anywhere, would be a terrible thing to do. The emotion made no sense, and now she realized, while running home backwards, that she must have decided to spend her day doing things in reverse to help her understand why she wouldn’t back into the bay. She remembered the foreman holding up his hands. “I’m all covered with grease, Mrs. Wstol, and all my men are tied up. I don’t want to get your interior dirty.”

Keys the him handed she. “I’ll just leave it here for now. I don’t care about a little grease.”

And later in the day, when she picked up the car, it was parked outside the bay, the headlights facing a chain-link fence, and she asked the foreman to have someone back it out and face

it toward the road. He seemed to think that was odd, but he maneuvered the car himself.

"Little early for a drink?" She flinched at the voice. Bodybusy neighborhood the, Hunter Mr. was it.

"Thirsty bit a am I," she said, amused at the way she imitated one of Jonathon's traits that so annoyed her. Lucky she said that, she thought; if she hadn't she might have said, Mind your own business, or If I didn't have a neighbor like you I wouldn't need to drink. And that reminded her of something she once said to Jonathon: "If I didn't have a husband like you I wouldn't need to drink, so just blame yourself." And Jonathon had said, "Yourself blame just so." She'd thrown one of the kids' hard rubber balls at him, but he jerked his head to the side in time to avoid it, only to have it ricochet off the wall behind him and bounce into the back of his head. Laughed he that at; her not.

Mr. Hunter pretended to ignore her remark and turned away from her, tending to his small front-yard garden. Petunias.

Efi backed into her house, put one bottle in the refrigerator, and tried to put a corkscrew into the other while holding it behind her back. She fumbled a few moments, but finally was able to master the required twists of her wrists and fingers to insert the corkscrew neatly; pulling was more difficult, and after several tugs she almost gave up. But, she told herself, doing things backwards was important, so she stayed with the task, and after about a minute, the cork began to give; she pulled smoothly, careful not to jerk—that was how wine spilled—and then, success, the bottle was open. She even managed to pour some into a long-stemmed glass while holding it behind her.

She sipped the sauterne. Just sweet enough, she decided. Cold were it only if, perfect be would it. Still, it was what she wanted. It was what she had wanted for years, whenever there were things she did not want to remember: the way Renee had said, "I hope to God I don't turn out like you"; or the way Jonathon, Jr. had insisted on going away to high school, and she knew why, she knew he couldn't bear to be around her when she drank, and she drank all the time; and mostly what she wanted to forget was the way Jonathon, Sr. had distanced himself from her. He never asked her to accompany him to campus parties; he did the food shopping, ran the errands, everything outside the house, without her; and for years they'd had separate bedrooms. Now

that the kids were gone, he ate most of his meals out, at Gia's or The White Owl, even McDonald's.

Him hated she how.

So when he told her, told everyone, his colleagues in the history department, the neighbors, even the bishop, as she stood by, that he was going on a seven- or eight-day hiking trip in the Wasatch, she was infuriated. Why in God's name did he have to flaunt the distance between them. And when he dared, as he was about to leave, to wake her at 4 A.M. in the chill of the Utah spring, to ask her to move the station wagon so he could get the Jeep out of the driveway, she was enraged, so enraged she was willing to use the word. She had groggily risen from bed and, with only his Utah Jazz jacket over her flannel pajamas, half-staggered out the front door and got into the wagon. She pulled the vehicle forward, powered down the window, and hissed at him, "Why couldn't you move the car yourself? You enrage me." She remembered liking the sound of that so much that she repeated it. "You enrage me."

He stood in front of the Jeep, behind the wagon, and smiled his most sanctimonious smile. "Me enrage you," he said with false sweetness.

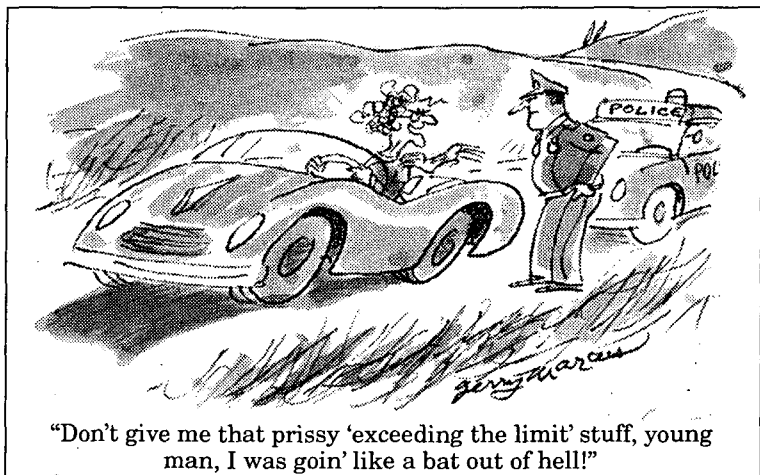
As she sipped her wine she remembered the heat that rose from her gut, into her breast, and then entered her throat; it tried to force its way out of her mouth, but her teeth were clenched, her lips forced into each other with hatred, and other forces took over; her hand shifted the gear violently from P to R, and her foot pressed down as hard and fast as it could, pushing the pedal to the floor, and in what must have been less than one-one-thousandth of a second, she realized what she had done, and she tried as rapidly as possible to move that same foot to the brake pedal and to shift the gears back to P or anything other than R, but before that could be accomplished she heard the *whomp*, felt the jerk of the car's rear end smacking into something, and prayed to God she had not done what she knew she had done.

She rushed out of the wagon to the front of the Jeep and looked down at her husband, still and quiet beyond silence. "Oh, my God," she said, and only when she did not hear him reply, "God my oh," did she fully comprehend what she had done.

The sauterne lost its sweetness. But she refilled her glass and drank more. Quickly and greedily. And again she refilled her

glass. And again she emptied the glass as if she were unable to sate her thirst. But no matter how quickly she drank she could not stop the flood of memories pouring into her. The memory of how she lifted Jonathon into the back of the Jeep, how she used the winch on the front of the Jeep to pull it with the wagon, how she towed the Jeep and Jonathon out of town, over miles and miles of dirt road, and then detached the wagon from the winch and drove the Jeep at least two miles over rocky road, up and up. And how she managed to tug Jonathon from the Jeep and pull him to the edge of a cliff, and how she pushed him—rolled him—over the edge and watched him bang from rock to rock as he tumbled more than the length of a football field, and how she remembered to bring and toss after him his camping equipment, the tent, the backpack, the battery-powered lantern, everything neatly tied to the aluminum back frame. And how she walked back to the Jeep, remembered to take the keys from it, and how she then walked the two miles or more to the wagon and drove back home, arriving just as the sun was bringing enough daylight to see the colors of the houses clearly. She remembered feeling proud of her thoroughness.

But not now. Now the wine was bitter. It didn't help her, didn't keep her memory from going backwards. She hated the wine; and she drank more and more of it. It of more and more drank she. ●



"Don't give me that prissy 'exceeding the limit' stuff, young man, I was goin' like a bat out of hell!"

LANTERN OF VIOLENCE

by Louis Allegri



He hurled an obscenity at the whiplashing rain. It wasn't normally his style, but enough was enough. Someone up there, lately, had taken a dislike to him. A ridiculous idea, but too much stress does revive the vestiges of old myths and superstitions. He laughed, waving a hand at the black heavens dismissively and blinking the rain from his eyes.

The flickering yellow light was closer now and he breathed a little easier, for the sign of life which had kept proposing and rejecting itself—toward which he had struggled through the black storm, which had shocked him with its suddenness and violence—wasn't just a figment of his startled brain. He forced himself, eyes dazzled and blinded in turn by forks of light, head bowed and exposed, along an uneven dirt track which he sensed rather than saw.

He had wanted the break; away from the "darling this" and "darling that" at the television studios, as well as, lately, those moralising looks of disdain—bloody hypocrites!—and to put some distance between himself and his wife Rosamund, now recovering in the nursing home where her large blue eyes in that china-doll face were gradually coming back to life. He felt unhappy at the thought of how life would be later when she would play the role of the abused yet forgiving wife.

The odd noises from the howling darkness ahead puzzled him, but then he screwed up his fine, slightly aquiline nose, the unpleasant stench telling him he had neared a pigsty whose denizens were squealing and grunting in panic at each crack of

A resident of Brighton, England, Louis Allegri has had nearly seventy short stories published in magazines and anthologies in England. He joins us for the first time with a tale of a television actor who stumbles on a terrifying distortion of reality. †

thunder. Something brushed his memory like the moment in a dream when the twilight of awakening gives way to reality.

Weke, weke!—so cries a pig prepared to the spit. The words ascended in his mind. Now where did that come from . . . ? The pig was a metaphor. . . . *Titus Andronicus*. Long time since he did Shakespeare. . . . Was it at Stratford or the Old Vic? Well, he had come a long way, moneywise—horrible expression—since then. Do pigs sense the spit and live in panic all the time? What the hell was he rambling on about?

“Thank Christ!” He dived into the sheltering low porch of the squat, stone, two-storied building he had now reached, and whilst trying to shake the wet from his sports jacket and trousers, he stopped his activity, disturbed by what he saw.

Unable to find a knocker or bell push, he hammered on the door with his fist, trying to avoid contact with the rustling wreath hanging there, as if afraid it might carry some contaminating disease.

This was all he needed after the recent painful trauma at the television studios—a battering deluge, a hanging wreath, and funereal company.

After months of work on the last television serial, the best script and role he had ever had, he had felt marvelous and still full of energy and enthusiasm—until the unexpected anticlimax.

He had really needed a couple of weeks’ complete break after that unpleasantness. And the author of the serial, Geraint Davis, who came from these parts, had suggested the place for its peaceful tranquillity! But he had also been asked, whilst there, to visit the author’s cousin, Wyn Jenkins, a few miles from town.

He had spent barely an hour with Jenkins, a taciturn man who lived alone. And when he left, the man had advised him to follow a track that was a shortcut back to town, as the weather was turning and the change could be violent and sudden around those parts. For further directions he could look in at Mrs. Thomas’s place on the way. Twenty minutes later heaven’s black fury had descended on him. Why the hell hadn’t the morose fellow mentioned there had been a death in the Thomas family?

It had been a gem of a script; the serial was creative and realistic, to say the least. No soap opera, that. Almost directed itself. The studios had been inundated with complaints when the program had to be abruptly concluded.

"Ah, you silly bitch, Rosamund," he muttered, as he had done so often since it happened.

It was bitter luck that such an excellent television serial, one that was considerably enhancing his career, had to be discontinued when his wife, Rosamund—Sarah in the script—had suffered a nervous breakdown. The script had hurriedly to be amended. Although time had been pressing, he was still surprised at the way the author had plundered what had been a minor masterpiece with that cheap, melodramatic denouement, but then he seemed to be in an alcoholic mist at the time and given his reputation for genius, it was accepted.

Women weren't rational. "That-is-a-fact!" He raised his bowed head as if to challenge any opposition. Always being flushed through tides of emotional crap! He pressed his body against the cold wall of the porch as a sheet of lightning reflected the stone surround of the pigsty with its crying denizens within.

"You poor suckers." He laughed, blinking his eyes as darkness descended again. "And all you've got to look forward to is ending up as greasy bacon, sausages, and pork chops."

He was surprised at the extreme way his wife had behaved when the other woman came on the scene and he was caught flagrante delicto on the studio couch. Her initial reaction was understandable, he supposed. Bit of a French farce really, though. He couldn't resist a chuckle at the vision of the delightfully blushing, exposed figure of the promising starlet gathering up her clothes and dashing from the room, followed by the comically amazed look of his wife.

But then Rosamund should have got over it and not let such a thing addle her brain. After all, they were supposed to be sophisticates nearing the twenty-first century. Why take such things so seriously? There was only this one life—and that was it! No second chance. So why not make the best of it? Such short-sighted, emotional attitudes.

His mouth turned down. Women could be so possessive. He remembered his three sisters—he always seemed to be surrounded by women—treating him like a king. Inferiority complex, he supposed, for all their increasing power today.

What the hell are they doing in there? He left the shelter of the porch to try and see through the small window from where the yellow light—his beacon—had guided him, but the curtains were drawn too tightly, and after rapping on the window, he

hurried back to the shelter of the porch and hammered on the door again. The storm seemed, if anything, to increase in fury, causing him to huddle closer to the wall; pigs still squealing their fears, the wailing blackness pierced by even more numerous forks of lightning to add to their panic. "What's the matter with the silly people, are they deaf?" he said to the wreath.

Apart from everything else, the stupid business with Rosamund could damage his career. He wasn't sure how it would affect his image. The public could be odd and fickle, though often women seemed to be attracted to villains. And he had made an enemy of her uncle, the producer, and God knows who else, and the sponsors weren't too happy, as if they were all Simon Pure.

Rosamund was very popular, loved by masses of fans. He had sometimes wondered whether sweet Rosamund had any lovers but had never confirmed this. Her uncle and the director and the author, Geraint Davis, had pandered to her as if she were a princess, and her role as gentle, angelic Sarah in Geraint Davis's work had been applauded all round, with plenty of business for the tissue salesmen to wipe away the tears.

Handicapped mother, heroic son, and innocent daughter Sarah had lived in their "Garden of Eden" in the story, within an aura of love and sincerity—until he arrived on the scene like Satan and Adam rolled into one, to destroy Sarah's virginity, with their world never to be the same again. The hurried denouement that lowered the tone of the program had involved the murder of Sarah by himself to shut her accusing mouth.

After the collapse of his wife, the studio's publicity men did their best to smooth his own tarred public image—made the most of by the more lurid press—and showed closeups of his caring and contrite face as he visited Rosamund in the nursing home and gently held her hand. He was stuck with darling Rosamund if he didn't want to damage his career. That was an implied threat from her uncle, amongst others.

He grimaced as his hand brushed the wreath again, and he was tempted to grab the thing and hurl it onto the rain-splattered earth. He didn't like dwelling on reminders of mortality. "Mortal man taketh thought only for the day, and hath no more surety than the shadow of smoke." God, he was getting morbid. It must be this place, and those lousy pigs. Well, he was still young at thirty-one, with a long way to go yet, and enjoy life he would, Rosamund or not. He angrily aimed a kick at the door,

but restrained his foot in midair at the sound of movement from within.

"Come on, come on," he muttered, and after a further delay the heavy door was partially opened.

"Hello there." He smiled, peeping around the door. "I'm Laurence Miles. Sorry to disturb you at such a time." He stepped closer to get a better look at the angular woman, who could have been any age between forty and sixty-odd, made bulky by her heavy black clothes, as she also studied him from the shadows of the long passage behind her; long bony fingers with neglected nails clutched the edge of the door, a walking stick was in her other hand.

And someone else was watching him; he could see the heavy-jawed face peering around the open door of the lighted room further along the passage.

"This—monsoon caught me as I was walking back to my hotel. It was a pleasant sunny day when I started my walk through your Welsh hills this morning. Terrible out here now. I saw your light—only just! Otherwise, God knows where I would have landed up," he went rambling on, but she kept staring at him as he stood shuffling his feet, curling the toes of his left foot where wet had penetrated his shoe.

Come on, you stupid woman, he said to himself, and had the urge to push the door inwards. "May I come in then? It's not nice out here, as you can see! Even your pigs are crying out for succor. Just until this rain eases off, madame," he said, beginning to lose his temper at her protracted silent stare. He pushed himself forward as she reluctantly eased the door open further to allow him entry, and after she closed the door, he followed her lumbering figure with her tapping stick—clearly aiding a bad left leg—along the narrow passage. . . .

It wasn't until he stood with his back to the blazing coal fire, after removing his steaming jacket and—presuming her silent permission—placing it over the back of a plain wooden chair near the fire in the room off the passage, that he took more notice of his surroundings. The massive, thirtyish man in a red sweater, with a silly, lopsided look on his florid face that he wasn't sure was a grin or just his natural appearance, was, he imagined, the woman's son.

She looked utterly worn out as she brushed a wisp of black hair from eyes of staggering sorrow—in a sallow face with a hairy

mole on the side of a prominent nose that seemed uncertain of itself, above a long, pointed chin.

Her heavy black costume with its long skirt, from below which dark, woolen-sheathed legs emerged, wouldn't have quite suited the Parisian fashion houses. He wiped away his developing smile with the back of his hand; also, if only momentarily, to cover his nose and escape the nausea he felt for the greasy smell of stale food that pervaded the stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere.

Still, beggars should not be choosers, he consoled himself. It was better than being outside where even the pigs were complaining. And trying to find his way over the God knows how many miles to the town and the hotel where he was staying, he'd have caught double pneumonia, or finished up lying at the bottom of a derelict mineshaft or in some torrential flooding river—as he almost had done earlier. Some shortcut! Geraint Davis's cousin needed his stupid head examined. But then, living in such remote conditions must affect one's brain, he thought.

He hoped they wouldn't offer him food or drink, for the room made him feel unclean, and he promised himself a bath as soon as he got back to his hotel.

Cobwebs drifted lazily about the beige ceiling and crumbs of bread lay on the faded wine-colored carpet. The place had the look of sad capitulation. Its own particular nervous breakdown, he thought wryly, with no nurse to tend and keep life moving along toward recovery.

He dry-washed his hands, giving a little shiver and a "Brrr," as he looked askance at the man whose gaze was fixed on him and smiled at the woman.

"Some climate you have around here, Mrs. Thomas. I was told by Mr. Wyn Jenkins, across the valley, that I would come across your place on my way to town, and might find sanctuary here, and further directions. The weather really caught me on the hop. Never known anything like it. Once I slid down an embankment in the—Stygian darkness." He grinned. "Almost fell into a nasty fierce river. Nearly crossed my own black infernal Styx."

"The river?" she said, pressing a hand to her heart and sucking in her breath—but clearly not impressed by his Thespian purple prose—her brow darkening as if he had said an obscene word, and her voice as heavy as the blue-velvet Victorian furniture

that helped stifle an atmosphere that made breathing difficult. He tugged at his collar, his ears pricking at the strangled unformed words that emanated from the man beside her.

The large, floor-to-ceiling Welsh dresser opposite him held cobwebby shelves of blue chinaware and copper utensils, a chipped Toby jug, old biscuit tins, mugs, a pot of marmalade—and he noticed a broken plate lying on the floor as if they couldn't be bothered to pick up the pieces.

The doll startled him! Seated on a corner chair in the shadows, with her large white face, staring blue eyes, and open mouth showing tiny white teeth, and wearing a fine lawn dress and silk bonnet. She reminded him of his wife's infantile fetish, the doll she had kept since childhood. When feeling unhappy with him, she would take the silly thing to bed with her; it took the place of headaches, with sleep all that particular night would offer him. But there was something that looked obscene about this—thing. Apart from it seeming bedraggled, its neck was at an angle and clearly broken.

Odd! It was at his wife's suggestion that the director had used a doll as a gimmick in the serial, and he had broken it after disposing of Sarah in the program.

The oil lamp that had drawn him through the storm toward the farmhouse flickered uncertainly on the large gate-leg table in the middle of the room, surrounded by greasy, unwashed dishes, bits of bone, and other leftovers from meals. Remains of pork chops? The thought of them cutting the throat of one of their screaming companions made him feel a little sick.

He sensed a climate of despair.

"I suppose the lines are down?" He waved at the oil lamp. "No electricity. Does it often happen?"

"Yes," the woman said, staring at him in a quizzical manner, as did the man, and he felt he was undergoing a silent interrogation.

Memento mori again! The sight of the second wreath, resting on the television set in another dark corner, jarred his nerves, and he felt an increasing revulsion for the lugubrious atmosphere and its occupants.

"You've had a bereavement?" He stated the obvious. "I'm sorry," he said as the pair of them stood on the other side of the table continuing their mute stares and he rubbed the warmth of the fire down the back of his thighs. The man's mouth was

agape. What the hell was the matter with them? He took a comb from his jacket pocket and swept it through his dank blond hair, flashing a handsome smile at the woman—a smile that normally worked wonders from starlets to dowagers.

Her bony, heavily veined hand grasped the crutch of her silver, fox-headed walking stick, and a brief image crossed his mind as he tried to picture her beneath the bulky costume—a habit of his—before shaking his head and hurriedly dismissing the developing image.

A momentary hint of compassion enhanced his awareness. That tortured face, he thought, seemed her real self and no dramatic mask, showing a depth of sorrow he would dearly have loved to achieve as an actor.

He could draw out emotions like picking plums from a tree: jealousy, rage, hope, despair, sorrow, joy, revenge, lust—love! Whatever his lines required. And was there no difference off-stage? Every man creating whatever particular self circumstances required—notwithstanding Rosamund's sentimental jargon about love being the heart and substance of life. Yet, if people were just peripheral traits blown about by the winds of fate, what was left to prevail?

The way she was studying him was disconcerting rather than flattering, and he felt the man's eyes still fixed on him.

"This is a very lonely, isolated place," he said to her, folding his arms tightly across his chest, breaking the silence—apart from the occasional spitting from the coal fire, the extra-loud thunderclap outside their little world, and the ticktock of the grandfather clock behind the doll's chair. "You don't get many visitors, I suppose?"

Who the hell would want to spend a day here except a de Sade masochist, he joked to himself.

"... lonely," she sighed, her words breaking into his reverie, her stick quivering uncertainly as she glanced at the man he supposed was her son, who looked crestfallen by her gesture as she turned away.

"So lonely without Sarah," she said more to herself.

Sarah, he laughed within. Couldn't get away from that name. "Princess" in Hebrew, Davis had told Rosamund, and she had loved that.

There was a sob in the woman's voice before her mouth twisted with a sharp pang of grief. "No-o . . . Oh no!" Her deep, stomach-

churning groan chilled him; monstrous, unrelenting truth had reared up, he thought, as she touched her thin, quivering lips with a gnarled, shaking hand—so different from the hands of his acquaintances.

"My poor little angel." She seemed to be struggling for breath, looking around the room, as if her Sarah were hiding in one of the dark corners, her eyes finally resting on a small framed photograph over the fireplace of a smiling, attractive young woman who looked something like his wife with her big round blue eyes, long golden hair, and slightly pointed chin.

"My dearest little daughter. Oh Sarah, Sarah what has been done to you? Why, why?"

"Mam!" The big man's hoarse cry shocked him further. His face could have been a tragic mask, but for the sloppy movement of his fat lips. She turned suddenly and held her son with a fierce intensity, resting her head on his broad shoulder. "Oh Emlyn. My poor unfortunate son," she said. They remained in this state for a full uncomfortable minute, her son's eyelids—with surprisingly long pale eyelashes—shut tightly.

"Sarah gone," the man then croaked. "I miss Sarah, miss Sarah." A tear slipped down the side of his large, upturned nose, and he opened his eyes and looked down at his mother. "Bring Sarah back, Mam. You must bring Sarah back."

The two of them looked like a grotesque pair of peasantry from a Brueghel painting, he thought. "Sarah was your daughter?" he said rhetorically. . . . "Affliction may one day smile again, and till then, sit thee down, sorrow!" He then said in as solemn a voice as he could muster, "You must try not to dwell too much on past sorrows, otherwise the present becomes lost, doesn't exist, and we can only truly live in the present."

The words tripped off his tongue as he remembered using them in a past script.

"Loved Sarah, Mam," her son mumbled.

"We both did, Emlyn," his mother said. "We both did so very, very much."

"Want to marry Sarah."

"Hush now, Emlyn," she whispered.

"Want to marry Sarah, want to marry Sarah!" His voice became loud and insistent.

Marry his sister? This was getting really bizarre. And he was puzzled and annoyed at the way they kept staring at him as

they stood behind the table. He took an increasing dislike to this scenario—Yet was there something familiar about it all? He tried to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

A look of incredulity now distorted her face as mother and son spoke quietly together, a lick of spittle probing his weighty chin, which she wiped away with her hand. Her son then moved some dirty dishes aside and pushed the oil lamp nearer the opposite edge of the table to see him more clearly.

"What's the matter?" He frowned, as two pairs of eyes—sickened by life's bitter draught—continued to stare at him as if he were some bug beneath a microscope. They were getting bloody rude, he thought, and was tempted to tell them so.

"It's him." His nerves twitched at the woman's words, and she leaned against the table to stop from falling. "Jonathan Calvin."

"Ah, I see you've recognised me." He bowed with a smile, disturbed by their odd reactions, yet feeling some satisfaction. Television had an audience that made those attending his now rare theatrical engagements look minuscule by comparison.

"Why did you come here? Wrong, so wrong. Shouldn't have come here," she said. Her jaw had dropped bewilderedly, exposing a bottom row of large, uneven teeth. She leaned against the table disturbing a brown-stained teapot.

"Well, I don't follow you," he said. "Told you, I was walking and got caught in the storm—"

"Haven't we suffered enough?" Her eyes were now sharp blue unwavering pinpoints, and she wrung her hands towards the ceiling. "This is cruel, too cruel! At least leave us in peace now."

"Cruel," son parroted mother.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why have you come to torment us?" Clearly becoming more distraught, she kept looking from him to her son; her voice was a lament.

"Love Sarah. Want to marry Sarah. Cruel." A tear slid down the man's fleshy red face and he looked down at his mother as if she could, at any moment, produce Sarah from the heavy folds of her skirt; she whispered to him, gently caressing his large head.

"Want to marry Sarah. Loved Sarah."

The hulk was getting on his nerves. "What on earth is he going on about?" he said to the man's mother.

Wanting to marry his sister? he puzzled . . .

"Ah!" Oh my God, he thought. It was the TV Sarah he wanted to marry. The poor slob wanted to marry his wife, Rosamund. He had the decency, he felt, to stifle the laughter brimming up as he looked forward with relish to telling Rosamund about her great lover in fulsome detail. Probably cause her to have another breakdown.

"You mean the Sarah in my last serial?" He looked into her eyes, trying to keep a straight face.

He continued to be surprised at the number of gullible viewers who confused his roles in dramas with his real self—particularly after that last extremely realistic script. People could be unbelievably idiotic. Desperate for some colour and meaning in their lives, he supposed. A thought that would hardly have crossed his mind before Geraint Davis's masterpiece.

It had been a bit of a learning process, as masterpieces were supposed to be. And there had been moments of emotional depth he had never experienced before—at least not since way, way, way back in early childhood, but then that was a time of fairy tales—which hadn't lasted. On stage, emotionally he was a sort of Jack of all trades, efficient at exhibiting whatever feelings were required, but it was a false thing and surely no different in real life off the set. His wife was always preaching about profound self-sacrificing love, where even survival itself came a poor second. Well, he could never countenance that nonsense. Survival was the name of the game and emotional adrenaline was used for that purpose and no more, for all the civilised and mannered pretence.

Emlyn and Rosamund. His imagination ran riot as he pictured the pair of them in the maternity ward: Emlyn seated on the edge of Rosamund's bed, little booties with flowers in them, pink and blue ribbons, masses of greeting cards, raggy dolls—as he remembered when one of his sisters had her child. Emlyn holding Rosamund's—Sarah's—hand in his huge fist, and whispering sweet nothings. The thought! A Salvador Dali image. It wasn't nice thinking this way about the poor slob, but he couldn't possibly resist telling his darling, sensitive wife all about it. Probably make her more self-conscious when she enacted her future roles, as she started to imagine what effect, for good or ill, her lines were having—on those out there!

He had received some very unpleasant letters and telephone calls from deranged viewers who had threatened him for elimi-

nating his wife in the serial, garroting her as she held her dolly, and then breaking the doll's head after hurling Sarah into the tumbling waters of a river.

"Bit of a devil, wasn't I?" He gave a wan smile at the woman. "But believe me, madame—and Emlyn,"—he grinned—"Sarah wasn't so wonderful, if you went deeper into her character, for all that sweet caring role. In fact, when you really went behind that attractive, cosmetic facade, golden hair and big blue eyes, she could be a bit of a pig—or sow is more appropriate. Deserved what she got if you ask me!"

Was he talking about his wife or the role she had been playing? He was getting as barmy as the two characters confronting him, but they needed awakening from their fantasy world.

Come to think of it, the present scenario had similarities to the serial. For a moment, in the stifling atmosphere, he wondered whether he was in one of those odd dreams. Sometimes he would awaken feeling utterly alone. He had been so long involved in the serial it had become almost real. Occasionally he would even call his wife Sarah! And there was the river, and the farm—but this was no Eden, and Emlyn certainly no hero—There was their gentle, innocent Sarah, though, who had been despoiled by—who else but that rogue Jonathan Calvin, who had then, to save himself, bumped her off and dumped her in the nasty river. And there was even the broken doll. It was all a sort of *déjà vu*. He would talk to Geraint Davis about this when he got back to the studios, for it surely wasn't coincidence?

He contrived a smile again, but there was no hint of humour from the woman, and her son was frowning, looking utterly bewildered, deep ridges above his eyes, his mouth murmuring silent words as his hand rubbed through his thinning reddish hair. An inner storm worse than that outside, he mused. What the hell does go on inside a mind like his, he wondered. All sensation and agitation and confusion with no rationale. Was that the true substance of man before civilisation covered him with its gloss?

"... you are a heartless one." The woman's words penetrated his thoughts and left him with an uncomfortable feeling.

Unhappy and about to defend the slur on his character, he refrained with a smile. Which character she was referring to, he wasn't sure. What he was sure about was that if he stayed in

the place much longer he would go as nutty as the other two, and that was a blinding fact!

"Well, blame the scriptwriters, dear, not me. They're the ones who play God. I'm merely the messenger, to use the old cliché. The messenger—you understand?" he arched his eyebrows.

How could people be so ridiculous, so ludicrous? Living alone in their strange, claustrophobic little world probably made the television an even more potent and essential part of their dim lives. That camera's eye on the studio set had a dimension of power he hadn't fully realised before. If there was nothing intrinsic and lasting within, was Big Brother then insidiously making and destroying, at whim, the peripherals that made man as we know him? He hadn't given much thought to such ponderous musings. But what affected him more was the disturbing realisation that, unbeknown to him, this pair of grotesques had for week after week after week been looking in, watching him and Rosamund—Sarah.

They were living in their own sad little closed-circuit world, with the magic lantern in the corner. A world in which he had played a leading part! He had made love to Sarah—and he and his wife had been involved in some nude scenes; he shuddered at the thought—whilst they sat chewing their pork chops, with nothing outside but their lousy complaining pigs awaiting their own miserable fate. There were those pigs again—

"Come on now, dear." He shook his head, trying to clear the mist. "Don't you think you're being a little foolish? I realise you're probably not yourself after your grievous loss. Such bereavements leave deep scars. And living alone here with—" he coughed and avoided looking at her son. "Death is only a passage to something better—maybe a real Garden of Eden." He didn't believe a word of that.

"Sure I killed darling, innocent Sarah. She had to be written off. You mustn't take these things so much to heart, Mrs. Thomas. Take out a hanky and have a nice cry and then forget it. Enough to carry the burden of real life—a painful passage o'er a restless flood—before we're blown away by time and circumstance." Did they know the difference anymore? He felt sure her crackpot son didn't.

The silent stares again were annoying and even more so the ticktock of the tall grandfather clock—which told him it was nearing the hour of six in the evening.

"Well, I'd better get going, otherwise they'll be sending out a search party for me." The place and its denizens were getting too stomach-churning. "Keep on that track," Geraint's cousin had said, "and you'll come across the Thomas farm. It's the only place between here and the town." Keep on the yellow brick road—now he was in Oz. His mind was wandering.

"I promised to have a chat with some of the locals this evening in the hotel lounge," he said, feeling he might as well be conversing with himself, as the woman was whispering to her son, holding his arm. His mouth opened wide as if he were about to scream before his mother put a hand over it.

"They've a—drama group in the village." He tried to ignore the man as he slipped into his jacket. "And when I was recognised I promised to give them the benefit of my experience. I like to help budding amateurs; after all, each of us had to start at the bottom once, didn't we? Didn't we?" He glared at the man, who was making him increasingly angry and who was rubbing his temple with a stubby hand that reminded him of a large pig's trotter.

"You should try and put your son in the picture, you know, madame. He is really confused." Picture wasn't quite the appropriate word to use, he thought. But the pair of them needed shaking free of their unreality.

"Go away," she said wearily and sucked in a deep shuddering breath. "Go now! You stole what happiness my Emlyn had in life."

She was as nutty as her son.

"Come to hurt my Sarah."

The fool. "I've had more than enough listening to your—son and his stupid Sarah—utterly sick of that name."

For a moment he thought he was in the studio facing Sarah's accusing mother; his words were similar. And he felt convinced now that Geraint Davis had this place in mind when he created the work. So many similarities. And, of course, he had received his comeuppance from the heroic son, whom the alcoholically hazed Davis had concocted. But what a black farce to make Emlyn the handsome hero, if that's what happened. Well, authors did have odd minds.

"Leave us. Go away!" The woman was waving a hand violently towards the door of the room.

Exit Jonathan Calvin. He smiled, but something about the denouement still nagged from just below consciousness.

"I'm not going to indulge you in this crass stupidity any longer. Emlyn's pining not for your daughter, you know! but a mass of bloody electrons."

"You may despise my son, but he has so much love to give, if only there were someone. . . . But someone like you cannot possibly understand that," she said, surprising him by stringing so many words together after her previous, almost monosyllabic utterings.

A woman who wouldn't know the difference between Superman and Pirandello, with a lumbering faulty mutation of a son, preaching to him about love. The quicker he was out of the incestuous confines of this tomb the better.

"I hope you find a preacher to marry you and bloody Sarah!" He grinned at the man.

"Disappeared since yesterday, Mrs. Thomas. It was a very rough night and he might have had an accident." Sergeant Evans looked searchingly at the woman standing beside her son, who was seated finishing the remains of a meal at the cluttered table.

"He could have wandered off the path in the storm and passed near here. Sure you never saw or heard any sign of him? Constable Dai Williams is having a look around outside. We've been searching the hills around here this morning for hours without success."

He gazed at the broken doll in the corner. "I'm very sorry, dear, we've not yet caught up with that—creature who murdered your daughter. Is it a good thing to keep that broken doll you found by the river? Sarah was a little gem and ran this place marvelously well after—Mr. Thomas—went away. A sad loss, my dear. Funny old world, isn't it?"

The pair of them had always been a bit peculiar. Her husband, a violent man, had deserted them almost three years earlier, after which Sarah had run the farm lovingly until she was found strangled and thrown into the local river five months ago.

"I realise how you must feel about that man still on the loose, but we are trying our very best. You've had a terrible time, Mrs. Thomas. Believe me, we'll never rest until we've caught the culprit who did that bad, bad thing. I know that won't bring Sarah back but—"

"Pigs!"

Evans glared at her son, food splattering from his mouth across the table.

"Pigs!"

"Come on now, Emlyn. That's not a nice way to talk. We're doing our best within our limited resources. I'm sure your mam understands that. I promise we'll never close the file until we've caught that wicked killer. Terrible responsibility those moguls have who run the goggle box, Mrs. Thomas," he said, as he noticed the wreath on top of the television. "Often a dark lantern of violence," Sergeant Evans pronounced. It was one of his favourite subjects. "Helps weaken psychic and social taboos and makes aggression easier and more acceptable for those inclined that way. And, after all, we're still struggling to escape the dark confines of our animal ancestry."

"Pigs!"

"Now look here, son." Evans stuck out his jaw, his anger rising. "I'm trying my best, under the circumstances, to make allowances for you, but if you keep on like that, I shall really begin to get annoyed! Ah, Dai." He turned, relieved, as the tall, beanpole constable entered, and Evans screwed up his bent nose at the stench his colleague now carried.

"You feeling ill, Dai?" He frowned at the ashen face of the constable. . . .

"What?" he said, as Constable Williams bent down and whispered in his ear. Evans turned as pale as his colleague. And they both stood watching the couple, silently, in awe, for a few minutes.

"You're a good woman, Mrs. Thomas," Sergeant Evans then said. "But you've been handed too much ill fortune by fate—or call it by whatever name you like. I'm sure you're not to blame for this. I know how much you love Emlyn, but it's best to tell the truth now rather than prolong the agony."

Mrs. Thomas gazed at each of them in turn. "Came from my belly," she then said, and leaning over, warmly kissed her wretched Emlyn, who was still chomping at a bone in an obsessive sort of way.

Life does distribute its pains and joys indiscriminately, Evans thought, and looked forward with relish to throwing those words at the Reverend Gareth Edwards, the chapel preacher, next time they had one of their volatile discussions.

"I'll be glad to get home to a good meal and put my feet up after this day," Evans said, as Constable Williams drove him through a now drizzling rain toward the police station in town, a few hours later, after the couple had been taken into custody. "Funny that wreath on top of their goggle box. My normally very reliable instincts tell me, Dai, that aspect needs looking into further."

"Oh, it's definitely a shrink's job," Williams said. "No use trying to deal rationally with those two."

"That Sarah was a lovely girl," Evans mused. "Looked after the pair of them and the farm with loving care after her dad deserted them. He was a real bastard. . . . You know, I'm now beginning to wonder again."

"What?" Constable Williams said.

"Just a thought. After what's happened. I always had the suspicion that Mr. Thomas could be lying somewhere under the sod of their farm—or even . . . ?"

"You mean?"

"Well, it is a possibility." Evans pursed his lips. "And I've always felt that poor author's cousin, Wyn Jenkins, knew more about it than he cared to say. But then those people are very tight-lipped and Mr. Thomas was a real nasty. And why did that actor fellow go off the beaten track and take that odd way back to town? There's a lot of nagging associations about this that leave me unhappy."

"Well, you always were a bit of a Maigret, Sergeant. It'll be quite a shock when that actor's poor wife is told."

"Yes. Still, you know these theatrical people, Dai. Can't dance alone for long. And I wonder if—"

"If it'll be Geraint Davis?"

"Good for you, Dai Williams. Is there a touch of serendipity there?"

"What?"

"Did you see the end of that serial, Dai?"

"No."

"Nor I. . . . But it would be intriguing now if there were squealing pigs involved— Oh no!" Evans swallowed hard.

"What's wrong?"

"The wife's got pork chops for dinner this evening." ●



ADELE

by Stuart Kaminsky

“H

ot in here.”

She looked around my tiny office, trying not to show uncertainty and disapproval.

“Air conditioner doesn’t work,” I said.

“Then why do you leave it on?”

“Fan makes the air move a little. Your daughter is missing?” She nodded.

So far all I had from her was that her daughter Adele was missing and that the woman’s name was Beryl Fitztown. Beryl was about fifty, dark hair cut short, on the thin side, wearing a serious but slightly shabby loose-fitting blue dress with a belt and no style. She kept her purse on her knees and her knees tight and together. She had nice blue eyes and had once probably been very pretty. She also had a blue-yellow bruise on her cheek the size of a large peach.

"I have a picture," she said, opening her purse.

I waited. The air conditioner buzzed and I pretended it wasn't hot.

"Here."

She handed me a little photograph that looked as if it was taken in one of those automatic camera booths you find in malls.

The girl was definitely pretty. She was blond, with straight hair and a fine set of white teeth, wearing a green sweater.

"Adele," Beryl said, looking toward the window as if her daughter might suddenly appear.

It was my turn to nod.

"How'd you get hurt?"

She touched the bruise on her cheek and said,

"Fell in the bathroom of the motel."

"Tell your story, Miss . . ."

"Mrs.," she corrected, looking down at her purse. "Husband died when Adele was little. Tree."

"His name was 'Tree'?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "His name was Dwight. Tree trimmer and landscape gardener. Fell out of a big oak."

"Sorry," I said.

"I raised Adele alone. Not much to do for a child in Brisbane, Kansas. I worked days and a lot of nights at the restaurant, Jim and Ella's Good Food. Truckers welcome. Most nights, Adele would watch the TV, look out the window of the apartment at the oil rigs in the field. At least till she got older and got in with the crowd."

"Bad crowd?" I asked.

"Only crowd in Brisbane, if you count four or five kids as a crowd."

"Go on."

Stuart Kaminsky is the author of more than a dozen novels and has gained a reputation based in equal parts on the humor with which he infuses his novels and the contemporary hard-boiled style in which they are written. He has only rarely produced a short story, and so it is a privilege to bring you his short work "Adele" in *EQMM*. †

"Not much more to tell. She wasn't much of a student in high school. Got into a little trouble. She's got a temper like Dwight, her pa."

"The tree trimmer," I said.

"Got on the cheerleaders but didn't go to practice and they cut her," said Beryl with a sigh. "In a couple of school plays. One she had a lot of things to say. How do they remember all those things to say?"

I ignored the sweat on my scalp.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well," Beryl Fitztown went on, "life is a puzzle."

"Yes," I said.

"She ran away a little over three months ago. No explanation. Just packed up and left a message taped to the TV saying she was going and she would call. I told Josh Hamilton, the sheriff, that she had run and he took a picture just like the one you're holding and said he'd follow up and maybe get her on milk cartons and paper bags if she didn't show up in a few weeks. She didn't show up. Josh suggested I get one of those things you put on your phone that shows the number someone is calling you from. I did, but no call from Adele till two weeks ago. I wrote down the number. Adele sounded bad, scared. Wouldn't tell me why. I told her to come home. She said she couldn't, that she'd be all right. Call came from right here, Sarasota, Florida."

Beryl Fitztown reached into her purse and came up with a sheet of paper. She handed it to me. It had an eight-one-three area code number.

"I called her back," Beryl said, fingering the little silver latch on her purse. "Called back maybe fifteen times. No answer. Little over a week ago a man answered, said I was calling a pay phone outside a motel on the Tamiami Trail. I got a ride from Ella to Wichita, bus here. Adele is sixteen, just barely. She's pretty, none too bright, and in trouble. I've been wandering around for the last week looking for her, but I don't know how to do it or what to ask."

"Did you go to the police?"

"Yes," she said. "First thing. They took my only other nearly grownup picture of Adele and the phone booth number and said they'd look into it. Nice man, a sergeant, said it would get posted and go in the computer. I got the feeling Adele was going in a big box with a hundred or more other lost children."

"I think you're right."

I placed the phone number on my desk, right next to the photograph of the smiling girl.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lewis Fonesca. I used to work for the state's attorney's office in Cook County, Illinois. Investigations. One morning my wife walked out on me and another Chicago winter was starting. I wasn't going any further up in my job and I'm not ambitious. I was cold and too many places and people reminded me of my wife. I also kept running into her in places we used to go together. She's with someone else now. Am I telling you too much?"

"No," she said.

"How did you find me?"

"Man at the Dairy Queen," she said, nodding at the door, beyond which was a concrete landing overlooking a Dairy Queen on Route 301, which was also Washington Street, though in my six months in town I never heard anyone call it anything but 301. They also called Bahia Vista, Baya Vista, and Honore Street was usually referred to as Honor Street.

She looked at me for about the third time and saw a forty-four-year-old man with rapidly thinning hair, reasonable dark looks, and a short-sleeved button-down blue shirt and grey jeans.

"You're a detective, like on television," she said. "Rockford."

"More like Harry Orwell," I said. "I'm not a detective. I don't have a license in this state. But any citizen can make inquiries. That's what I do. I make inquiries."

"You ask questions."

"I ask questions."

"What do you charge?"

"Fifty dollars a day, plus expenses."

"Expenses?"

"Phone calls. Gas. Things like that. I report to you every day. You can stop my services any time before the next day. My guess is I'll find Adele in two or three days or tell you she's not in Sarasota."

"Okay," she said, opening her purse once again and pulling out a wallet from which she extracted five tens. "I will need a receipt."

I took the money, found a pad of yellow legal-sized paper, and wrote out a receipt. She took it and said, "I'm staying at the Best Western behind the car wash. I'm in room two-oh-four."

"Well," I said, handing her my card, "you can call me here day or night."

Beryl Fitztown took my card, looked at it, put it in her purse, stood up, and snapped her purse closed. I stood up too.

"I am not a warm woman," she said. "I do not show my affections. I did not do so with Adele, but I do love her and I think she knows that. Please find her."

"I will," I said.

And she was gone.

I pulled some Kleenex from my drawer, wiped my head, face, and neck, and threw the used tissues into my Tampa Bay Bucs wastebasket. My shirt was sweat-blotched and clinging to my back. It was a hot December day in Sarasota, probably about 93 degrees and humid, hot for winter, but not unheard of. It was the middle of the snowbird season, tourists and winter residents renting or returning to owned houses and apartments, barely affordable on the mainland in Bradenton and Sarasota or out of reach on the beaches of Longboat and Siesta Key. All in all, about 200,000 people in Manatee and Sarasota counties combined.

In Sarasota, south of the airport, there was a strip of low-cost motels on the Tamiami Trail stretching for a couple of miles to downtown and the theater district. The primary residents of the motels were prostitutes, though in the winter French and German tourists wandered in. This was where I'd start looking for Adele's phone booth. If that failed, I'd go south of Bayfront Park and downtown and start my search among the malls, restaurants, and shops. Sarasota has hundreds of restaurants catering to retirees, tourists, and full-time working residents.

I didn't think Adele would be that tough to find, and I needed the fifty dollars. If I'd known that I was going to be dealing with two murders . . . Hell, I probably would have taken the job anyway.

I was living in my office. My sleeping bag, a pillow, and my clothes were in the closet near the window across from my desk. Next to the closet was a slightly brown-stained sink where I brushed my teeth, washed, and tried not to look at myself in the mirror above it when I shaved. Almost every day I drove to

the Y.M.C.A. where I showered, worked out on the machines, and swam.

I had made the rounds of lawyers in Sarasota and Bradenton, offering my services at a price substantially lower than they were paying to licensed investigators. I was starting to pick up some business from law firms and some significant hostility from licensed private investigators, but was within the law as long as I simply asked questions and brought the information to whoever hired me.

I knew Sarasota and Bradenton reasonably well by now. They were still small towns where a pretty young girl might be remembered. The first thing to do was check the telephone numbers in phone booths on the Tamiami Trail. There was a chance that Adele had used a phone near where she was staying.

I put Adele's photo and the phone booth number in my wallet, put on my Chicago Cubs baseball cap, and went down to the Dairy Queen where my '84 Toyota was parked.

It was almost six in the evening. Dinner. I bought a large chocolate-covered cherry Blizzard and a deluxe burger and thanked Dave for sending me a client.

"Lady needs help," he said. "Kid running away like that."

Dave was probably around my age, but years in the sun working on boats in the bay had turned his skin to dark, dry leather. His body was still hard and strong, but his face had gone to sun-fried hell.

"I think I can find her," I said while he prepared the burger and shake.

"Kids," Dave said with a shake of the head.

When my order came up I showed Adele's photograph to Dave. He looked at it for a while and squinted in thought.

"I don't think I've seen her," he said, "but who knows? She cuts her hair, maybe dyes it, puts on a lot of makeup, orders a Dilly bar, and off she goes. Who knows?"

"Thanks, Dave," I said, taking my Blizzard and burger.

"Who knows?" he repeated. "You know what I mean?"

"I know," I said.

I ate in my Toyota with the motor running and the air conditioner on full blast. I had paid \$500 for the car when I hit town. I had put another \$300 into repair work within two months. It was running and the air conditioning worked.

The dividing line between Bradenton and Sarasota is just north of New College and the Asolo Center for the Performing Arts. Sarasota is a Culture town. Capital "C" in Culture. An art museum, five Equity theaters, including one that only does musicals, a massive concert hall, two ballet companies, and an opera company.

There wasn't much that could be considered big-C culture near the first phone booth outside the Warm Breeze Motel across from the Harcourt Inn. The number was wrong, but a prostitute took me for a Mister Right.

"Want some company?" she asked.

She was a washed-out brunette with sad eyes, rough skin, and almost no breasts.

"No, thanks, but I'd like to know if you recognize this girl."

I took out my wallet and handed Adele's photograph to the hooker, who didn't look much older than the girl she was looking at.

"Nice-looking kid," she said flatly and handed the picture back. "You a cop? I thought I knew all the cops in town. New?"

"I'm not a cop," I said. "I'm just trying to find a missing girl and ask her some questions."

"Thought you were a cop. Lots of cops last week or so."

"Why?"

"Why am I telling you this? John got killed at the Yellow Sun, across the street there. Cops marched all the girls in, asked questions, found nothing."

Traffic whizzed by. A car slowed down. A dirty-blond kid with a big round face stuck his head out of the window and in a redneck voice called,

"That the best you can do, man? You are really sorry."

And the car sped up.

The girl clenched her teeth, took a breath, and tried to jump back in the game.

"What else you got in the wallet?" she said.

"Five dollars if you know the girl in the picture and can tell me something about her."

"Five bucks," she moaned.

"Hard times," I said.

"I'll take it," she said. "Before I talk."

I handed her a five and put the wallet back in my pocket.

"Her name's Suzanne," the girl said, folding her arms across her chest. "Worked from the Linger Longer."

She nodded over her shoulder. Two motels down was a tired neon sign with a flashing arrow pointing the way to the Linger Longer Motel.

"And?" I asked.

"Then she was gone," the girl said with a shrug.

"Who was working her?"

The girl shrugged again and looked across the busy street at nothing.

"That wasn't worth five dollars," I said.

"All you're getting," she said. "Hard times."

It was my turn to shrug. I moved past her and headed for the Linger Longer. I had a start. Pay dirt on my first phone booth. Adele's local name and the place she stayed.

The glass door on the Linger Longer Motel office said American Express, MasterCard, Visa, Discover were welcome and that German, Spanish, and French were spoken. It also said that the clerk kept no cash. I pushed the door open. There was no lounge, no chair, and not much room. A coffeepot sat half full with Styrofoam cups next to it. Behind the low counter, a kid sat reading a book. He put the book down and said, "Can I help you?"

He took off his big glasses and stood up with a polite smile.

I took out my wallet and the photograph of Adele and handed it to him. He put his glasses back on.

"Suzanne," he said. "Stayed here . . . oh, a couple of months back. Why?"

"Her mother's looking for her," I said.

He cocked his head to one side and looked at the photograph again before handing it back to me.

"You're not a cop. If you're a private investigator, show your card."

"I'm not a private investigator," I said. "I just ask questions for people. Suzanne have a last name?"

The kid thought for a while, thumped his right hand softly on the counter, sighed deeply, and said,

"I think she was one of those chanteuses in a club down in Port Charlotte."

"You get a lot of one-name chanteuses staying here?"

"A surprisingly large number," the kid said. "You a Cub fan?"

"The cap. Yeah."

I took off the cap and wiped the sweatband with a tissue from a box on the counter.

"Covers the lack of hair," the kid observed as I put the cap back on and dropped the tissue in the wastebasket.

"You like Suzanne," I said, getting back to the subject. "I mean what you saw of her?"

"She didn't talk much. Some of our chanteuses like to talk. Some of them could drive a person nuts. Yeah, I liked her."

I just stood there waiting while he considered what to do next.

"Look," he said, lowering his voice though there was no one there but us. "I'm a student over at New College. This job pays well and I get to read, do my homework, and once in a while practice my Spanish, German, or French with tourists who don't know what kind of motel they've wandered into."

This time the pause was very long. He looked out the window at the passing traffic.

"Would five bucks help you decide?" I asked.

He shook his head and said,

"She worked for Tilly. Room five in the corner. If he asks you how you found him, tell him you tracked down a girl named Elspeth, tall bleached blonde, short hair, big lips, average breasts. Elspeth ducked on Tilly three weeks ago and headed back to San Antonio."

"Thanks," I said.

"I hope you find her," the kid said. "Reminded me of a beautiful crippled bird my sister and I took in when I was a kid."

I went across the cement parking area toward the corner of the L-shaped motel. There were two cars parked, one, a little blue Fiat, in front of room five.

"Who?" a voice came from inside the room when I knocked.

"My name's Seymour."

"Seymour what?"

"Just Seymour," I said. "I'm a chanteuse."

An eye peered through the tiny, thick-glass peephole.

"You a cop?" he asked.

"Everyone asks me that," I said. "No, I'm not a cop. I just have a couple of questions to ask you."

"About what? Why?"

"About Suzanne," I said. "Her mother's looking for her."

"So am I," he said, opening the door.

"Tilly?"

"Come in," he said.

I went into the motel room and he closed the door. He was a lean, handsome black man about six foot and wearing a pair of clean jeans and a neatly ironed button-down white shirt. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five.

I looked around. The room was motel tacky. It didn't look like home.

"I don't live here," he said, reading my mind. "Why are you looking for Suzanne?"

"Her mother's here. Wants to take her home."

"Home? Mother? She's got no mother, no home. She said she ran from a bitch of an aunt and uncle back in L.A."

"Adele's got a mother and she's not from L.A."

"She lied," he said, shaking his head. "Want a drink? Don't drink myself, but I keep a fridge for guests and visitors."

"No thanks," I said.

"Suit yourself," he said and went to the small brown refrigerator in the corner of the room. He pulled out a can of Mountain Dew and went to sit on the worn-out, rust-colored, two-seat sofa. I remained standing.

"Adele ran out on you," I said.

He laughed and took a sip of Mountain Dew.

"They don't run out on me," he said. "Once in a while I might ask a young lady to leave, but they don't want to go. I take a fair split and I never raise a hand. And I don't get tired."

"Elspeth," I said. "She ran away."

"She say that? I threw her out. She had a bad attitude, as her heading you to me proves. Elspeth. God-awful name, but she wouldn't let me give her another."

"Suzanne," I said.

"Good kid. A little too sad in the eyes, but a good worker and she didn't complain. Had a temper, though. Gave me this."

He rolled up his right sleeve. A deep red gash was starting to form a scar.

"Not bad to have a few battle marks in my business," he said, rolling his sleeve back down.

"You know where she is?"

He touched the can of Mountain Dew to his forehead and closed his eyes. Someone opened the door with a key. A heavily made-up woman in a short, tight black dress stepped in, smiled at me, and looked at Tilly, who still hadn't opened his eyes.

"Go get a cup of coffee, Francine," he said. "Make it a big cup."

Francine's smile disappeared on her very red lips and she eased out of the room and closed the door.

"What the hell," Tilly said, opening his eyes and sitting up with his arms spread over the back of the sofa. "I'll tell you something if you give me your word that you won't tell where you got it."

"Why would you take my word?" I asked.

"I wouldn't, man," he said with exasperation. "I think it would be just fine if you found Adele and took her home to her mama. I think it would really piss-off a couple of people who I'd like to see pissed off. You follow?"

"Blindly," I said.

"Mr. John Pirannes," Tilly said with contempt. "Big operator out of the Beach Tides Resort on Longboat. Services tourists, mostly rich old men. Picked out Adele when she wasn't here for a week. Came to me with the usual backup, a top-heavy Haitian with bad skin. Mr. Pirannes made me an offer, a piece-of-shit offer. I took it with a smile."

"People selling's a tough job," I said.

"Hey, I just gave you free, key information. Don't stand there trying to give out trips to Guilt Town."

He emptied the can of Mountain Dew and placed the can on the small white table in front of him. I had to give him credit. He didn't crush the can and shoot it toward the wastebasket near the refrigerator.

"You're right," I said. "Thanks."

"Hey," he said, clicking on the television with a little black remote. "I told you. I'm doing you no favors. Getting Adele away from Mr. John Pirannes won't be a run to the 7-Eleven, if you know what I mean. Now if you'll just move out. You're blocking the screen."

"Last question," I said.

He hit the mute button and the voice of a vaguely familiar woman stopped behind me.

"Last question," he said.

"How did you know her name was Adele, not Suzanne?"

"You called her . . ." he started and then paused. "You know that mailbox about a half block down?"

"Yeah."

"She wrote a postcard to a friend in Omaha, said she was fine, had a job as a secretarial trainee and loved Sarasota."

"You broke into the mailbox?"

"That's another question and you're all out. I'm trying to be polite, but you are worrying me."

I walked to the door and the woman's voice came back on. I glanced at the television screen just before I left. Mary Tyler Moore was trying to explain something to Ed Asner.

Francine was just inside the motel office when I passed. She was smoking and doing what she was told, having a cup of coffee. I pointed back at the room to show that it was all hers. The kid behind the counter looked my way and I nodded to show that everything had gone well with Tilly.

The evening was young and I had work to do. There was still an hour left before the Selby Public Library closed. I went down the Tamiami Trail to Boulevard of the Arts, parked in front of the Hyatt, left my Cubs cap on the front seat, and walked to the library where I went through microfilm of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* looking for a mention of Mr. John Pirannes. I scan fast, learned it working for the state's attorney's office. No Pirannes, no mention of the Beach Tides Resort other than some ads that looked the same as for all the other hotel resorts on the island. I did come across an item about a Canadian tourist who had been murdered at the Yellow Sun Motel. The story suggested that he had probably caught a thief in his room and paid with his life. The prostitute had told me the dead guy was a John, a customer. The newspaper hadn't chosen to dig into this one.

I hadn't expected to find much. I went to the librarian's desk.

The woman behind the desk had long dark hair and a pleasant smile.

"You ever hear of a man named John Pirannes?" I asked.

The woman kept smiling and said,

"I beg your pardon."

"You're a librarian," I said.

"I've been aware of that for several decades," she said.

"Librarians, I've found, are good sources for local . . ."

"Gossip," she said, still not losing her smile.

"Information," I said.

I showed her Adele's photograph. It rang no bell. I told her my story and she listened without asking a question.

Four people were lined up behind me now to check out books before the library told them to go home.

"We're closing in five minutes," the librarian said. "I'll meet you across the street in the Hyatt bar."

I got out of the line and headed for the Hyatt. The night had brought no relief from the heat, and though it was only a little over a football field away, I was sweating as the hotel's chill hit me.

At the bar I listened to a conversation between two guys about some movie. The bartender took my order, a Bass Ale, and I considered showing him Adele's photograph. I thought better of it and sat nursing my ale and listening to movie talk while I waited for the librarian.

She showed up about fifteen minutes later, white silk blouse, colorful skirt with a lot of red and yellow in it.

"Sorry," she said, sitting next to me on the stool. "Took me a little longer than I thought."

"Worth waiting for," I said, hoisting my glass of ale to her.

"I was right," she said. "You were trying to pick me up."

I hadn't been, but since she let the door open . . .

"And I was trying to get information on John Pirannes."

"Usual, Rhonda?" the bartender asked.

Rhonda the librarian nodded and the bartender asked if I wanted another ale. I said yes.

"I have twenty minutes," she said, checking her watch. "I'm meeting a friend for a movie."

"Man?"

"I was trying to give that impression, but no, a woman. So, why are you asking questions about John Pirannes?"

"I do it for a living. Young girl may be with him. Girl's mother wants to find her and get her back to Kansas."

"I see," she said, accepting the glass of dark iced amber from the bartender.

"You're together?" the bartender asked.

"On my check," I said.

Rhonda toasted me and took an I-needed-that sip of her drink.

"John Pirannes," she said, putting the glass down and looking at me. "Likes to wear white, combs his white hair straight back, and has nicely capped teeth and a decent vocabulary. Word is that he has all his money tied up in cash. Been here five years. Very, very high-class call-girl operation. Reputation for angry public outbursts, usually with one of his girls. Always with a little guy named Tony Spiltz who works out every day at the Y."

"Little guy with a shaved head?" I asked.

"That's him," Rhonda confirmed.

"I see him at the Y when I get there early in the morning. Man of few words."

"But he reads a lot," she said. "A man who loves books, particularly the classics. My take on Tony?"

"Sure."

"He spent a lot of time somewhere where there wasn't much to do but read," she said, going back to her drink.

"Okay, so we have a dangerous man with a bodyguard ex-con," I said. "That helps."

"Good," she said, looking at her watch again. "Look, I've got to go. You know where to find me. Thanks for the drink."

She touched my hand. I liked it and then she was gone. I settled the bill, nodded at the bartender as if we were old friends, and headed for the nearest telephone. In less than half a day, I had done what I had been hired to do by Beryl Fitztown. The next illogical step would have been for me to go out to Lido to look for her. Logic prevailed. I called the Best Western Motel and asked for Room 204.

"Yes," Mrs. Fitztown said.

I could see her sitting, fully clothed, legs together, on the bed watching PTL and waiting for my call.

"This is Lew Fonesca. I found Adele. I mean, I know where she is and who she's with."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you if you promise me to go to the police and ask them to help you. You'll know where she is. It'll be hard for them to say no."

"Please tell me now where Adele is."

"She's with a man named Pirannes, John Pirannes at the Beach Tides Resort on Longboat Key."

She repeated everything I had said and asked me to spell "Pirannes." I did.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll give you any additional money I owe you in the morning."

"We're even, Mrs. Fitztown, just go to the police with this information. You'll never get Adele to go with you on your own."

"I'm not afraid of whoremongers, Mr. Fonesca," she said. "I've come to understand that if the Lord is at your side you have nothing to fear."

"A big cop with a gun on your other side's not a bad idea either," I said.

And she hung up.

I had cleared a few dollars, not enough to fix the air conditioner maybe, but enough to keep me in burgers and shakes, gas and oil, and a large load at the Bee Ridge Laundromat. I decided I needed a television set and wondered what a small black and white would go for at the Goodwill.

I laid out my sleeping bag, took off my pants and shirt, and turned off the light. I listened to traffic zipping down 301 and heard a few voices raised and a little laughter from the Dairy Queen. I was almost asleep. Then I thought of something Beryl Fitztown had said.

I got up, adjusted my underwear, and turned on the lights. The phone was waiting for me on the desk. I called the police.

"Officer Scott," came a solid man's voice. "Can I help you?"

"Woman named Beryl Fitztown come in tonight to the po-lice," I said in my best rural Alabama.

"Yes?" Scott said.

"Well, I wondered if maybe like you could check to be sure she showed up, filled out one of them complaints."

"Who are you to Ms. Fitztown?" Scott asked.

"Brother, Orel Bass, live out near Myakka. I'm sure worried 'bout her, Officer."

"Who was the complaint against?"

"Well sir, she's mostly lookin' for her missing daughter, my niece, Adele, who's sixteen, and she thinks she knows where she is. I'm more'n a mite scared she'd go lookin' for Adele herself in the wrong places."

Long, long pause.

"I'm checking," Scott said. And then, "No complaint tonight from a Mrs. Beryl Fitztown. One wife abused in a bar by her husband, man who claims his house was broken into."

"Much obliged," I said, hanging up before he could ask any more questions.

Beryl Fitztown had said that she and the Lord could take care of John Pirannes or any whoremonger. What made her think Pirannes was a whoremonger? I hadn't said anything. He could as well have been a boyfriend or kindly old dentist who cared for runaways. Of course, Beryl Fitztown could have considered

anyone with her daughter a whoremonger, but it didn't sound that way.

I was dressed and out of the office in three minutes. Traffic was light. I went up to Fruitville, turned left, and drove to the Trail where I turned left and then made the right past Denny's to head over the bridge to Bird Key and then again over the causeway to St. Armand's. The bay was dark and glittering with boat lights, and St. Armand's Circle was alive with tourists. I swerved to avoid hitting a horse-drawn tourist carriage and then headed toward Longboat Key, over another bridge, and down Gulf of Mexico Drive, the only road on the five-mile-long island.

Longboat is money. Resorts and high-rise beach condos on my left, very private home developments on my right. Wealthy French and Germans lived here in the winter. Movie stars had million-dollar retreats, and John Pirannes and others operated quietly.

I pulled up to the guard gate at the Beach Tides Resort, rolled down my window, and smiled.

"Mr. Pirannes is expecting me," I said.

The guard was old, but he wasn't stupid. He looked at my beat-up car and went into his glassed-in hut to call. He was out in about thirty seconds.

"No answer," he said. "Sorry."

"I just have a . . ."

"Sorry," the guard said as if he were truly sorry.

I backed up, turned around, and went back out on Gulf of Mexico Drive where I did what I should have done in the first place. I drove to the small shopping mall a quarter of a mile down, pulled in, and parked. Not much was open, but there were other cars. I walked back to the Beach Tides Resort, hoping a cop wouldn't stop me and ask questions. I kept close to the trees and found a hole in the shrubs I could get through. Security at the resorts was fine as long as you tried to get through the front gate, but none of the resorts had fences all the way around them. With the help of the moonlight and the lights from the high-rise condo next to the Beach Tides, I stumbled through a pond, almost stepped on a dozing white crane, and bumped my knee on a brick barbecue pit. Then the beach. I took off my shirt, slung it over my shoulder, and sauntered down the beach past others on late-night strolls. At the Beach Tides I walked around the lighted pool where a single old man treading water nodded to

me as I passed. I tried three buildings, checking names in the lobby, avoiding the security people who rode around on little golf carts. In the third building, I found a J. Pirannes and pushed the button.

No answer.

I pushed again. This time a girl answered and said,

"Hello."

"John Pirannes, please," I said.

"He can't come to the phone now."

"Why?"

"I think he's dead," the girl said.

"Is this Adele?"

"Yes."

"Push the button and let me in," I said.

"Button?"

"On the phone, near the door, somewhere."

"Who are you, the police?"

"Good guess," I said. "The door."

I heard her put down the phone and I waited, phone in hand, watching the driveway outside for the golf-cart patrol. Then, a buzz. I hung up the phone and went into the lobby. Pirannes's apartment was on the sixteenth floor. I was up and running down the corridor in about twenty seconds. The door to Pirannes's room was locked. I knocked. I knocked again.

"Who is it?" a familiar voice asked.

"Lew Fonesca," I said.

The door opened and I found myself facing Beryl Fitztown. In her left hand was her purse. In her right was a gun pointing at my chest. The bruise on her cheek had turned puffy and purple.

"Please close the door," she said.

I closed the door.

Sprawled on the sofa behind Beryl Fitztown was a burly man with white hair combed straight back and a large bullethole oozing blood in the center of his chest.

"Where's Adele?" I asked, looking around.

"Gone," she said. "She answered the phone, pushed a button, and ran out of here."

"Maybe we should go find her?" I said.

She shook her head and motioned for me to sit in a flower-print soft chair across from the corpse. I sat. She kept standing.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Came here in a cab, tried to talk to him. Adele said she'd go with me. He said no, hit me, told me to leave. I shot him."

"And the tourist earlier this week," I said. "You walked in on your daughter and a client. He tried to stop you from taking Adele. That's how you got that bruise on your cheek. You shot him and . . ."

"Adele ran away from me. I searched, asked, and then I gave up and found you."

Beryl Fitztown sank into the sofa next to the body. He bounced a little. She didn't notice.

"Tony Spiltz took her away, didn't he?" I asked.

She shrugged, kept the gun pointed at me.

"Where did they go?"

No answer and then a deep sigh.

"We will sit here for an hour or two, overnight maybe," she said, "and then we will call the police."

"And you'll confess to two murders?"

"I will," she said.

I sat back and yawned. I was sleepy. There was a creep of stubble on my chin.

"You didn't kill either of them, did you, Beryl?" I asked.

"Killed them both," she said, holding up the gun.

"You tracked down Adele after you came to town, found her at the motel with the tourist. Guy tried to throw you out, maybe hit you. Adele had a gun hidden in the room for protection. She got it out, shot the tourist. You were ready to take a fall on that one to protect Adele, but she left you in the room, maybe telling you she was going for the police. She left and took the gun with her. Am I close?"

She didn't answer. I was close.

"So, you came to me, gave me this story about a phone call and a number," I went on. "I had no trouble finding the booth right next to the motel where our tourist was shot. I asked around, found her, told you about Pirannes, and you made the mistake of calling him a whoremonger. You knew what your daughter was."

Beryl Fitztown looked at the dead man and shook her head. I wasn't sure what it meant.

"You came here, went through pretty much the same scene you'd gone through with the tourist. Pirannes told you to get lost. Adele saw you getting pushed around. She went for the gun and 'boom,' one less whoremonger."

She didn't answer.

"Mrs. Fitztown, Beryl?"

"You are wrong," she said firmly. "I shot and killed both men and will so tell the police."

"Suit yourself," I said. "Meanwhile Adele is on the road with a half-mad guy with a shaved head. And I have the feeling that Adele pulls out that gun just a mite hastily. Who's she going to shoot next, Beryl?"

"She didn't shoot anybody," the woman said firmly.

"Nope," I said. "She didn't kill anybody. I think I'll leave you and Pirannes here alone for a nice long talk before you call the police. Let's make a deal. I don't run out and call the police, and you don't mention to them that I've been here."

She laughed. Not much of a laugh and not a healthy one, but a laugh.

"I'm not sending police to you to tell them some crazy story about my Adele killing people."

I got up slowly, gave her a little smile, and started moving for the door.

"Last suggestion," I said. "Turn her in. Get her some help."

"Man who took her had a pile of money. Said he'd take care of her."

"You believe that?"

"Not much choice," she said with a shrug.

I was at the door now.

"Beryl . . ."

"She looked so pretty, Mr. Fonesca," she said with a distant smile. "Not decked and painted like on television. She's a lost child, Mr. Fonesca. She needs a guiding hand."

And Tony Spiltz is just the guy to give it to her.

"She's my baby," Beryl said, looking at me for understanding.

I left the apartment and closed the door slowly behind me.

The night was hot and I still had to duck the old security guards and make my way back to where I hoped my car was still sitting in the parking lot.

I tried not to think about Beryl Fitztown sitting next to the corpse of John Pirannes and deciding when she should call the police. I tried not to think of Adele sitting next to Tony Spiltz, barreling up I-75 toward Tampa or down I-75 on the way to Miami. I tried not to think. I'm not good at it. I'd been a failure at meditation. If I got any sleep tonight, I knew I'd dream about Beryl Fitztown and the girl named Adele whom I had never met. ●



SEATING BOB

by Noel Whittall

They arrived together at the usual Monday restaurant. Three women and a man. The women moved easily, fussing with their purses, but the man was slow and dependent: Della, Cora-Jean, and Rose—and Bob, Della's husband. All small-town friends from school-days and now all senior citizens, as Della would proudly remind anyone when it suited her, expecting them to look politely surprised.

"I thought we'd just put Bob over there where he can watch the cars." Della steered Bob around the table and shuffled the chair back a little for him. "Bob likes to see the cars."

Bob sat down.

Cora-Jean and Rose arranged themselves to Della's satisfaction and after a lot of sighing and small adjustments, the tableau was complete. The ladies scanned the restaurant to see who else was having the Seniors' Lunch Special, but there were almost all strangers in today. Della silently categorized them with her usual confidence: The two young men looked like the crew who

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had fitted her new lawn sprinkler system; the really big guy had to be in farm equipment sales—or feed, at any rate; the couple in the T-shirts and shorts were on vacation and off their route, and *she* wasn't his first wife either. Now—that grey man with a white shirt and dark tie is *interesting*; black-framed glasses, neat moustache, and polished shoes—a professional for sure, even a doctor maybe. And there was the telephone lineman who was always there, it seemed.

The waitress today was Mary, the one with the rough complexion. Della didn't know how Mary kept her figure. Three kids, wasn't it? And working all the hours God sent. Her brown and yellow uniform dress didn't do her any favors, but her body didn't need any favors anyway. The male eyes in the restaurant automatically followed Mary to Della's table, but she managed to appear completely unaware of this. She switched on a tense professional smile and said, "What'll you all have today, ladies?" Bob didn't count.

"We're having the Special." Della dispensed with any possible discussion. "And an extra side order of onion rings for Bob." The Special was a Philly-steak sandwich with slaw and fries. \$3.99, ice cream dessert included, beverages extra.

Bob took all this in, but continued to gaze out across the parking lot towards the freeway. Life hadn't been so bad after all, since he'd had his stroke. They all cared for him better than ever, and as long as he didn't have to get out of the backseat of Cora-Jean's '73 Malibu two-door coupe, he could get along okay. Today they were in Rose's new Olds, with four doors and air, and he could get in and out real easy. He loved going out with the women for their lunches, and he reckoned that the Monday ones were best because he felt sure that this was where the action would come. Maybe not this week, maybe not next, but soon, for sure. They always put him where he could see the autos, and he liked that too, but just occasionally he wished they wouldn't order those extra onion rings; sure, he liked 'em, but he'd had an awful lot of them lately. They didn't use the right sort of fat to fry 'em in these days, either—never just as crisp as they used to be.

Mary topped up the ice water and then brought the orders, her rationed smile switching on and off briefly as each plate hit the tabletop. "Enjoy your meal."

Beth was the other waitress. 240 pounds and wearing the same style of brown and yellow dress as Mary. She was almost always on the same shift, too, and they shared tips. Usually. Unless there was a really big one the other girl didn't know about. They'd been at high school together, and had shared lovers too, and joints, back when Beth had grown hash behind the tomatoes in her daddy's garden. Her name was really Elizabeth, but it had always been shortened. Now it was official, because the waitress's brooch on her vast but only vaguely defined left breast said simply "Beth." She knew that the rest of the staff, Jim the Manager included, referred to her as "Big Bertha" when they thought she couldn't hear.

Bob liked Beth. He liked it better when she was their waitress because her smile was there most of the time. He liked to watch her fat hands put the glasses and dishes on the table, and he liked the way her fat hip pressed against his arm as she refreshed his coffee. Decaf.

A black Chevrolet pickup turned into the lot. *Dale's Janitorial Supply Co.* Bob knew it so well he didn't need to try and spell out the words on the door. Bob had owned a Chevy pickup once and could smell the plastic seats and remember how he had made a wooden rack to hold a glass of iced tea upright in front of the instrument panel, long before the makers had begun to offer such things as an option.

"There's that Dale Shackelford," Bob told himself as Dale braked the truck to a standstill and slid out of the driver's seat before the suspension had become tranquil with itself. Bob watched.

"Don't forget your dinner, honey," said Della, halfway through her own Philly sandwich and helping herself to another of his onion rings. She reached across and cut his food a little smaller and he clamped the fork as firmly as he could in his good hand, the left one. He would have liked some more dressing on the slaw, but it wasn't worth the trouble of trying to ask. Might distract him from the action, too, if it was going to happen today. He directed his attention to Dale again as the young man came past the Seniors' Lunch Special \$3.99, Wait Here to Be Seated sign at the entrance.

Jim the Manager was at the cash desk when Dale entered. Bob would have liked a better view, but he found it real hard to turn to his right, and anyway, Cora-Jean and Rose would have

been difficult to see around. Dale didn't wait to be seated, moving instead straight to Beth, who was cleaning a table in the non-smoking area. His left hand came briefly out of his pocket as he approached the big waitress and Bob watched the inevitable body contact. With Beth it was impossible to pass without some kind of contact. Bob didn't see the little packet slip into Beth's pocket, but he did see her pudgy hand smooth it in a confirmatory manner a few seconds later. Then, as he struggled with a forkful of Philly-steak sandwich, he tracked Dale's progress between the tables. Please Lord, don't let it happen any farther to the right, he found himself saying inside his head as the young man went out of his field of vision. Then Mary floated into his view, looking anxious, holding a tray in one hand and her almost-permanent pitcher of ice water in the other. Dale's hand passed over the tray, quicker than a blessing from a bored priest, and Bob saw the drop made. A little square of folded paper, not as big as a piece of candy, slid under Mary's thumb on the tray. Her professional smile switched on, tempered this time with relief; she escorted Dale to a table, filled his glass with ice water, and took his order as if he were a stranger.

This could be the day! Bob steadily ate his Philly sandwich, shared the onion rings with the "girls," and watched the parking lot for most of the time. How did that Dale get into it? he wondered, and why did the waitresses do it? Oh yeah, forty or fifty years ago a bit of marijuana was okay—called it *jerba buena* then—"good weed." He'd smoked a little now and then; come to think of it, he'd smoked with Rose on a few occasions. She'd been a delight in those days—bet Della would die of shock if she knew half the things Rose and he had gotten up to in those weeks before he signed up in '43. Then, Rose had been a wild young'un who already knew she could not get pregnant. Bob suddenly wanted to know why, and how she knew. He looked at her hopelessly across the table, the four Seniors' Lunch Specials by now reduced to heaps of debris. He would never know; he could make the words in his head, but if he tried to speak they would come out as trash again. He could hold a pen in his left hand, but the letters never came. "You writing Arabic?" Della would say. "Have to get an A-rab to read it." Then she'd squeeze his shoulders and he wouldn't mind so much.

Why did those waitress girls get messed up with real bad drugs? he wondered. He guessed it was cocaine, but it could

have been heroin. For a fleeting moment he wondered what it would be like to try. Then he let his mind range over the way the waitresses might use it. He imagined great big Beth snorting coke and then making love with Jim the Manager. He had sensed that there was something going on between them for a few weeks now. The mental picture was a strain for him, but he worked at it, even managing to feel a distant tremor of excitement at the thought of Beth's fat fingers moving around the manager's thin body. He got a flash memory of the brief affair he'd had with Cora-Jean down in Florida when they'd all shared a condo for a week and just Della and Rose had gone off to the opening of Epcot together. Cora-Jean was big, but not by any means as big as Beth. Then he imagined hard-faced Mary heating up heroin in a spoon over a small flame; then did she sniff it, inject it, or swallow it? Bob was vague on the mechanics of heroin use, but could easily adjust to the idea of Mary using it: A moody cow, that one, was the uncharitable thought he allowed himself. He was well off the mark there—it was coke, and Mary only got the stuff to keep her husband quiet: She earned the money, she fed the kids, she paid the bills, she did the washing, and he hit her if she didn't. She could never get enough coke to keep him quiet, but every bit helped. And no, she "never had anything to do with any of that" herself.

A police cruiser wallowed off the blacktop and into the parking lot. Not unusual, although more often the cops stopped here for breakfast rather than lunch. Bob watched it pick a line between the other parked cars, easily, for the restaurant was only a quarter full—and park at an angle close to the door. The second cruiser was a surprise to him. It stopped on the highway a few feet short of the entrance to the lot, still, its beacon off.

The women talked on and on over the chaos of plates. Garden, church, neighbors, grandchildren, the Gulf, the price of gasoline, TV. Mary eventually began to clear away and came round with the coffee jug again. "No more for Bob—he'll need the bathroom on the way home," came from Della as Mary poised at his side. Bob grunted, apparently companionably, but he was trying to say, "Be still, be quiet, I've waited months for this. It's a drug bust—just like you see in the movies—they've come for Dale Shackelford at last!" Bob couldn't believe they hadn't all seen what had been going on for weeks: the little packages, the small

rolls of bills, the faces of the waitresses whenever Dale's truck pulled into the lot.

It all went very smoothly. The two officers from the first cruiser entered the dining area. The grey man with the glasses took a handgun from his jacket, which had been hanging over the back of his chair, flashed a badge, and arrested Dale without resistance. The grey man exchanged a few words with the officers and then produced a radio from another pocket in the jacket. A few words were muttered into it and Bob watched the other cruiser drive into the lot in acknowledgment. A sullen procession made its way out to the cars. The two waitresses, Dale, Jim the Manager—all handcuffed and, in the eyes of the women, all of equal guilt. "Drug Raid in North Georgia Restaurant" read the Huntsville paper next day. "Diners Shocked at Mass Arrest."

Cora-Jean, Rose, and Della talked about it nonstop for days. "Who'da thought it? . . . and them waitresses so respectable, too. It's a pity what young folk get up to these days. That Mary has a family—I'm just sorry for the kids, having a mom like that. Who'da thought it?"

Bob thought it. Bob knew it. If he could only have formed the words, he could have told them about the auto that brought Dale his supplies. He'd seen it a few times across the parking lot of the Wednesday restaurant ("Welcome Seniors—Free Salad Bar"): a big plum-colored Lincoln with Tennessee plates. Dale had been getting a bit casual lately. When it started, Bob had some difficulty in seeing what was going on, but recently it had been obvious. The law or someone had been bound to find out sooner or later. Bob felt a sense of loss deep inside, though. There was little enough excitement these days, and he'd enjoyed watching Dale conduct his business. He'd known Dale vaguely since his folks had lived on the next block. Hadn't liked him then and didn't like him now. The sort of boy who was tough on his dog. Glad they'd caught him, but it would make Mondays and Wednesdays less interesting from now on. There was nothing exciting to look forward to except maybe the auto parts salesman who was cheating his boss by selling stock without paperwork. But that was at the Friday restaurant ("Seniors' Discount Fish Dish Today").

Bob relaxed and looked forward to the next week. Things weren't so bad. He loved the way they gave him the seat with the best view: That way he didn't miss a thing. . . . ●

SOLUTION TO MYSTERY CROSSWORD

ACROSS

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|--|---|
| <p>2. MARGARET (Millar)</p> <p>9. KATE (Morgan, creator of Dewey James)</p> <p>12. AMANDA (Cross)</p> <p>13. ODESSA</p> <p>15. RIMA (of <i>Green Mansions</i>)</p> <p>16. GERALD (Seymour)</p> <p>18. STUART (Kaminsky)</p> <p>20. PICT</p> <p>23. PSI</p> <p>25. CAW</p> <p>26. GRUBS (take)</p> <p>29. NORA (Charles)</p> <p>32. RAYS</p> <p>33. EUROPA</p> <p>35. PALMER (Stuart, creator of Hildegarde Withers)</p> <p>37. EARS</p> <p>38. PIMM</p> <p>40. JADED</p> <p>41. TOM (Clancy, <i>The Hunt for Red October</i>)</p> <p>43. <i>Death in a Distant Land</i> (Nancy Livingston)</p> <p>45. READ</p> <p>47. BLONDE</p> <p>51. GIDEON (Dr. Gideon Fell)</p> <p>53. ERLE</p> <p>55. DIONNE</p> <p>57. ELLIOT (Paul, creator of Homer Evans in <i>The Mysterious Mickey Finn</i>)</p> <p>59. EDGE</p> <p>60. PATRICIA (Wentworth, creator of Miss Silver)</p> | <p>3. AMI</p> <p>4. RAMS</p> <p>5. GNAT</p> <p>6. AD</p> <p>7. RAGAS</p> <p>8. TORT</p> <p>9. KELP</p> <p>10. ASDIC</p> <p>11. EASTWARD (Sir Walter Scott, <i>Westward, Ho!</i>)</p> <p>14. DA</p> <p>17. ERIN</p> <p>19. UPSPIN (pinups)</p> <p>21. CAREEN</p> <p>22. CRUSOE (Robinson, and Kit-tredge's Edwina)</p> <p>24. TRAJAN (Emperor; 53-117)</p> <p>26. GERTRUDE (Stein)</p> <p>27. UR</p> <p>28. BOP (pioneered by cornettist Dizzy Gillespie)</p> <p>30. OP (as in <i>The Continental</i>)</p> <p>31. A LA</p> <p>33. AM</p> <p>35. MD</p> <p>39. MILO (Minderbinder, from <i>Catch 22</i>)</p> <p>42. MAGOG</p> <p>44. NONET</p> <p>46. DINE (S.S. Van)</p> <p>47. BEEP</p> <p>48. DELI</p> <p>49. ERIC (Ambler)</p> <p>50. FETA</p> <p>52. DN</p> <p>54. LOI</p> <p>56. IDEM</p> <p>58. LR (and if you think this clue is weak, <i>Grafton me</i>)</p> |
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DOWN

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. JUTS</p> <p>2. MARY (Roberts Rinehart)</p> | <p>3. AMI</p> <p>4. RAMS</p> <p>5. GNAT</p> <p>6. AD</p> <p>7. RAGAS</p> <p>8. TORT</p> <p>9. KELP</p> <p>10. ASDIC</p> <p>11. EASTWARD (Sir Walter Scott, <i>Westward, Ho!</i>)</p> <p>14. DA</p> <p>17. ERIN</p> <p>19. UPSPIN (pinups)</p> <p>21. CAREEN</p> <p>22. CRUSOE (Robinson, and Kit-tredge's Edwina)</p> <p>24. TRAJAN (Emperor; 53-117)</p> <p>26. GERTRUDE (Stein)</p> <p>27. UR</p> <p>28. BOP (pioneered by cornettist Dizzy Gillespie)</p> <p>30. OP (as in <i>The Continental</i>)</p> <p>31. A LA</p> <p>33. AM</p> <p>35. MD</p> <p>39. MILO (Minderbinder, from <i>Catch 22</i>)</p> <p>42. MAGOG</p> <p>44. NONET</p> <p>46. DINE (S.S. Van)</p> <p>47. BEEP</p> <p>48. DELI</p> <p>49. ERIC (Ambler)</p> <p>50. FETA</p> <p>52. DN</p> <p>54. LOI</p> <p>56. IDEM</p> <p>58. LR (and if you think this clue is weak, <i>Grafton me</i>)</p> |
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THE OAK'S LONG SHADOW

by Joan Richter

"Miz Katy?"

"Alma!" I cried in surprise. The sound of her voice swept me from my Manhattan apartment to the house in North Carolina where my eighty-three-year-old father still lived. It was where Alma had been coming to work since I was a little girl—where tree toads sang at night and dawn came up when the first cock crew. It was where I had been born.

Although we talked often—about every time I called home—Alma never telephoned unless something was wrong. I was waiting.

"Yes, it's me, child. And I've got some sorrowful news. It's your daddy . . . he's gone."

So there it was, the words I knew would come some day. "Oh, Alma." My voice was a whisper, full of the child in me, although I was thirty-two years old.

"Miz Katy, there's more I've got to tell you, but you'll at least be glad to know that he went fast."

The long-feared images of my father in lingering pain faded, but there was enough in Alma's words to keep me on guard.

"Child, there's no easy way to say this . . . but your daddy didn't die no natural death."

Night passed in a sleep filled with tortured dreams, broken by times of black wakefulness that offered no answers. I kept hearing Alma's words, over and over again. So it was a relief when morning came and my flight from La Guardia landed in Raleigh and I was behind the wheel of a rented car, headed for Elkton.

I'd been over those forty-five miles dozens of times and had watched the spread of urban development devour the land. Each time another piece was gone, but closer to Elkton there were planted fields where summer crops thrived under a hot sun. From my car window they swept by in a comforting green blur, lulling me into a reverie of earlier trips home, and I let myself be tricked into thinking that when I turned down the stony back road that led to my father's house, he'd be on the porch, sitting in his high-back rocker, waiting for me.

I was in the thrall of that thought when the familiar fork appeared, marked by a cluster of mailboxes. My father's name, in black letters, was on one. Warren Cobbs. I got out to see if there was any mail and found a flyer announcing the annual Fourth of July Firemen's Fair, two weeks away. I stood there,

In March we had the honor of reintroducing readers to *EQMM* Department of First Stories author Joan Richter after an absence of more than a decade.

This month we have the pleasure of bringing you a story she wrote for the Mystery Writers of America's Fiftieth Anniversary Short Story Contest.

"The Oak's Long Shadow" was one of seven finalists in stiff competition for the award. †

squinting against the glare of the midday sun. It glanced off the sheet of white paper in my hand, off the tin of the mailboxes, the fence-post wires, off the land itself. I felt its heat, like fire from a giant grill, exaggerated after the car's cool interior. I made no move to get back inside, but stayed leaning against the fence, listening to the familiar sounds—the hum of bees and the sawing sound of grasshoppers, and in the distance the echoing call of crows.

I knew Alma would be waiting for me and that the crunch of my tires would be her alert. Before I got out of the car, the porch door swung open and she stood framed in the doorway, wearing one of the light blue dresses she ordered from a catalogue, in a style long enough to cover her tall, ample frame. There was more white in her steel-gray hair than I remembered, but it became her, gently framing her dark face. Even as I looked at her, my glance took in the giant tree that lay sprawled on the ground. Close to a hundred years old, the oak had established an instant forest between my father's house and the house next door. I'd heard about the storm and the tree coming down over the phone, but nothing Alma or my father had said quite prepared me for what I saw.

About ten years ago, the tree had begun to list in the direction of my father's house and became the subject of a debate between my father and his neighbor, Newt Harrison. Mr. Harrison was a few years older than my father, and also a widower. Their argument had taken the form of letters. Harrison wrote his in a shaky hand. Dad typed on an old Underwood and made carbon copies. As much as my father loved the old tree, he was for taking it down "before it falls on my house," he had written some years ago. His neighbor, in whose yard the oak stood, was for letting nature take its course.

Dad kept their years of correspondence neatly filed in an antique chest on a table next to his desk. Like everything in the house, the chest had its own special history. My father, who had been in the merchant marine well before I was born, had found it in one of the back alleys of Zanzibar, where he had put into port on one of his voyages. That was long before he married my mother, who had been twenty years younger than he. She died, too soon, when I was in high school.

All of this and more sped across my mind in that instant I stood looking at the tree, before I turned and hurried across the hot drive and up the steps into Alma's arms.

We stood that way for a long time, not saying anything, neither of us crying. Long ago Alma told me how she felt about tears. "Once you start, it's hard to stop. I just stay away from them as best as I can." I had adopted her view.

Alma had lunch ready, so we went inside and sat down at the kitchen table by the window that looked out onto what had once been an herb garden.

There were things we needed to talk about before I went into town to see the sheriff, but neither of us was ready for that just yet. Alma started off by asking about my job at "that big city magazine." I told her a story or two and then inquired about her family. Her husband had died years ago, leaving her to raise four children on her own. She got them all through high school. None of them lived in Elkton now.

"They all doin' just fine, except for Roland," she said. "He's been livin' in Chicago, you know, but his marriage has gone off the track. A few weeks ago he sent young Rollie Junior down here to stay with me awhile."

I remembered Rollie. He'd spent some time with Alma two summers ago. We'd gone to the Firemen's Fair that year. He was too small to ride the roller coaster alone, so I went with him. After the second ride, I called it quits. He pouted for a while.

"I love that child," Alma sighed, "but I'm out of energy for takin' care of a high-spirited eight-year-old. The first day he was here he got into a scrape with two fellas bigger than him. I know those boys and they don't fight fair. After that, I started bringin' Rollie over here. He and your daddy got on real well. They'd sit out on the porch, with Mr. Warren tellin' him stories about the days he was a sailor. That's what Rollie says he wants to be now."

After we finished lunch and the last dish was washed and put away, Alma took off her apron and led me outside onto the porch. We settled ourselves in the two rockers that had always been there and she nodded toward the fallen tree.

"It was truly somethin' when it fell. It was like the world was makin' some big announcement. Your daddy and I were inside listenin' to the wind and watchin' the rain come slicin' down. Then all of a sudden there was this roar. It sounded like thunder,

but it wasn't comin' from the sky. It was that old tree tearing up its roots."

She took a long, deep breath then and I knew she was ready to repeat what she had told me over the phone.

"Your daddy came out here yesterday, like he did every mornin', to read his paper and take another look at that tree. I was inside and had the sweeper runnin', so I couldn't hear anything but that. When it got to lunchtime, and he hadn't come in, sniffin' around the kitchen, like he usually did when his stomach was complainin', I came out here to get him. I supposed he'd just lost track of time, sittin' here lookin' at that tree, gettin' ready to write another one of his letters to Mr. Harrison. I expected he was gonna give me one to put in the mailbox on my way home. I tried tellin' him it would be easier if the two of them talked to one another, instead of writing all them letters, but I wasn't able to bring his mind to that."

She stopped then and pointed toward the floor between us. "Right there is where I found your daddy—all in a heap. I thought he was just collapsed, but when I put my hand to him, I knew he was gone."

She leaned back against the rocker and closed her eyes. I reached for her hand.

"I phoned the Rescue Squad right away and came back out here with a blanket to put over him. Child, I got right down here on this porch floor alongside your daddy, wishin' there was somethin' I could do, but I knew there was nothin'. I just thanked the Lord for makin' it quick. I told him, 'Lord, Mr. Warren would have appreciated that.' About then was when I saw his eye. I didn't see it before, because his head was turned. But I saw it then. It's somethin' I'm not likely to forget."

I dropped Alma off at her house and then drove into town to see the sheriff. The man with a smile almost as big as his moustache, who played poker with my father years ago, had been gone a long time, but the office was pretty much as I remembered it, and so was the uniform—black trousers and a gray summer shirt with a silver star on the pocket. The man wearing it now couldn't have been more different.

Sheriff Billie Jenkins was probably my age, thick-shouldered and muscular, with bright red hair slicked back from his temples and forehead with gel.

"Katherine Cobbs," he repeated in a way that sounded like he didn't know who I was.

"My father is Warren Cobbs . . ." I started to explain, but he cut me off.

"I know who you are. That colored woman at the house told me you lived in New York City. How'd you get here so fast?"

I heard the derision in his voice when he referred to Alma, but I decided it wasn't the time to pick a fight, so I just kept my answer short. "I got an early flight to Raleigh this morning."

"I suppose you're wondering about the body. We sent it over to Palmer's this morning. That's the only funeral parlor in town."

I frowned, trying to decide if he was just an awkward man, or intentionally rude. "I used to live here," I said slowly. "Palmer's handled things when my mother passed away. But before we get into that, I'd like to know more about how my father died."

He had been slouched in his chair, but he straightened then. "What do you mean, how? It was a bullet . . . went right through his eye. Whoever did it was a good shot."

I recoiled. "A good shot! What kind of a remark is that?"

"Remark? It's no remark. It's a fact." He gave me an odd, questioning look. "Why, you think it was an accident?"

"Sheriff, my father's just been killed. I don't know what to think. That's why I'm here."

His eyes narrowed and he worked his jaw as though he were chewing on a difficult thought. His voice was softer when he began, but it was too much of an effort for him to keep it up.

"You know, this here isn't New York City. Your ole man wasn't wanderin' around Times Square and got himself popped off by accident in some gang war. He was shot on his own front porch. You think that was an accident? That may make sense to you, but not to me."

"None of this makes sense to me," I said, trying to keep my anger under control. "Look, my father was old and frail. He didn't even go into town anymore. The farthest he went was his front porch. He wasn't bothering anyone."

"He must have been bothering somebody." The grin came slowly and the relish behind it was so mean it took me by surprise. His eyes brightened. "How about the ole guy next door? I hear him and your ole man have been feuding over that tree for years."

"Mr. Harrison? You can't be serious."

"It's the first thing that came to me, but Harrison's got a withered arm and uses a wheelchair. No way he could have lifted a twenty-two rifle and got off a shot like that."

"Is that what killed my father?"

"Lightweight hunting rifle. Aimed right, it can do the job. I don't suppose you see many of them in New York City. There it's somethin' small or sawed-off . . . easy to conceal. Around here everybody has a twenty-two, three or four of 'em, even."

I was on the verge of reminding him that I'd lived in Elkton half my life, so I knew what a twenty-two was, but I didn't get to it. The door to his office burst open and two boys, about nine and eleven, stumbled into the room. They had the sheriff's unmistakable red hair.

I started to smile, but that ended as fast as it began. The sheriff leapt out of his chair and gave it a shove that sent it slamming into the wall, adding another dent to the collection already there. He came from around his desk with his fist raised. "I told you two to wait in the car."

"Pa, we only wanted . . ." The younger boy's words were cut off by his brother, who yanked him by the arm and dragged him back through the doorway. I sat listening to the boys run down the hall, trying to imagine what kind of father Sheriff Billie Jenkins was.

"Be easier raising wild dogs than those two," he said, shoving the door closed. "My wife and I are split. I get them June and July." He slumped into his chair. "She spoils them all year and it's up to me to get them back in shape."

"Children are a big responsibility," I said feebly, feeling the need to say something.

"You married?"

I shook my head. "Sheriff, I don't mean to be rude, but let's get back to my father. I'd like to know what you're doing about investigating his death?"

His jaw tightened. "Look here, like I told you, everybody around here has a twenty-two. There's no way we'll find out who did it. Tryin' would be a waste of time."

I drove along Main Street toward the railroad station. Trains didn't stop in Elkton anymore. A few years ago the station house had been turned into a diner. I thought maybe a Coke would help me sort through my encounter with the sheriff. But it turned out

the diner was closed for the afternoon, so I made my way back along Main Street. There were other changes I hadn't noticed before—a new pizza place on the corner of Elm and next to it a video store. The yard-goods shop where Alma and I had bought the white taffeta for my high-school prom dress had its windows boarded up. At Magnolia, I turned left and parked in front of Palmer's Funeral Home.

The house felt empty when I got back, but it had more to do with my thoughts than being alone. The body I'd seen was my father's, but it wasn't the man I knew, or the way I would remember him. Yet seeing his inert form confirmed what I had been avoiding. He was gone—forever.

I kept thinking of that as I wandered through the house. The second floor hadn't been used much in recent years, not since the stairs had become too difficult for Dad to navigate. Alma had fixed up a bedroom for him downstairs, next to his study.

In the room that had been mine, the chintz curtains at the windows and the spread on the bed weren't as bright as they had once been, but Alma continued to wash and starch-iron them every spring and fall, so the sprays of pink flowers looked delicate rather than faded. The phone I'd gotten for my thirteenth birthday was on the desk in the corner of the room, white, yellowed now.

I was saving my father's study for last. It was the room I could close my eyes and see him in—at his desk, head bent, going through old papers, most of them from his days in the merchant marine. Across the hall was Alma's room, where she had stayed during the last weeks of my mother's long illness and other times when we needed her. A blue chenille spread covered her bed, and a cross of folded palm leaves, saved from some long-ago Palm Sunday, was on the wall. Propped up against a lamp on the dresser was a colored snapshot I hadn't seen before—Alma's grandson Rollie and my father, sitting on the front porch.

Rollie had sprouted since I'd seen him last. The yellow bandanna tied around his head made him look older than he was, and streetwise. The streets of Chicago, I thought, and imagined the handful he was for Alma. Part of the fallen tree was in the photograph, so I knew it was taken recently. I picked it up and held it close, looking at my father's face. He was smiling.

I crossed the hall then and went to sit in his chair and slid my hands up and down the satiny wood of its arms, imitating

his slow easy motion. "Your daddy does such a good job, I never need to polish that chair." Alma's voice joined my thoughts as my gaze traveled around the room, lingering over the books that filled the dark shelves, the family photographs and maps that were on the walls. Finally my eyes rested on the Zanzibar chest, on its stand beside the desk. I let my hand rest on its lid and recalled my father's younger voice.

"Smell it. See if you can guess what used to be packed in there."

Four years old then, I already wanted him to know how smart I was. From my perch on his lap, I leaned forward to sniff the open chest, then pressed back against the curve of his arm and looked up into his face. "Cookies," I said proudly and waited for the light of approval to appear in his gray eyes. But he shook his head.

I wiggled out of his arms and got down on the floor and stood in front of him, looking up. "Cookies," I said with a stubbornness I was later told I inherited from him, "the kind Alma makes . . . with those little hard black things for eyes and a nose and a mouth."

His deep chuckle filled the room and I relived in memory the thrill his approval always brought. "Smart girl. Those little hard black things are what you smell—cloves, all the way from Zanzibar."

I sat there with the memory moving back and forth across my mind, like the refrain of a familiar melody. Finally I opened the chest and took out the file of correspondence between my father and Newt Harrison. Clinging to it was the scent of cloves.

I smiled. I'd caught Alma one day, after she'd finished polishing its brass fittings, taking a few cloves from the pocket of her apron and dropping them into the chest. Color rose to her cheeks when she saw me and she smiled shyly. "We can't have your daddy not smellin' all those memories from Zanzibar."

Memories, I thought. I'll always have them.

Most of the letters were one-liners, quick and sharp, all about the tree. "I suppose you've noticed the oak is down," my father had written his neighbor just two weeks ago.

"My sight may be going, but it's not that far gone," was Mr. Harrison's reply.

"Standing, that tree was on your property. Now most of it's on mine."

"I'd say that's more your problem than mine."

A few days ago, when my father had read those terse lines to me over the phone, I'd thought he was exasperated with the situation and was asking for help. "Let me call Baxter's," I'd said, referring to the hardware store in Elkton. "They're bound to know someone who'll come out with a rig and a chain saw. They'll get rid of that tree in a day or two."

Dad had laughed, a low easy chuckle. "Then what would I do for entertainment? No, I think I'll wait awhile."

I sat there, replaying his words, thinking about the meaning of them, and on impulse decided to give his neighbor a call. The Harrisons had moved next-door after I'd left for college, so I never got to know them, except to wave on my trips home.

His housekeeper said Mr. Harrison was resting, but she was sure he would enjoy a visit. Tomorrow morning at about eleven would be a good time.

I called my father's lawyer after that. I had talked to Russell Worth from New York right after I'd gotten Alma's call, but there were more things to discuss with him now. I wanted to tell him about the sheriff.

Russell Worth came from an old Carolina family with a big reputation and strong political connections. I reached him at his office in Raleigh. "Sounds like Billie Jenkins needs a fire lit under him," he said. "A visit from the state police might help. I can arrange that. I'll make a few other inquiries, too. It'll be interesting to get a line on what people in town think about the sheriff. I'll get back to you tomorrow, before noon."

The sun had only begun to come up when I woke the next morning. I fixed myself some coffee and took it out onto the porch and sat there watching the sky slowly light up. Cloaked as it was in the vapor of early morning, the forest of the tree appeared more dense even than yesterday and I went down the steps to take a closer look.

It was the dark mass of earth and roots, upended in a giant tangle, that drew me on. For some reason I wanted to look down into the hole the tree had left. I followed our property line and then crossed into Mr. Harrison's yard. When I reached it, and stood at the edge of a giant cavern hollowed into the red clay earth, I thought of how we used to say that if you dug far enough you would get to China. I stood there for a while gaping, and then turned in continuing wonder to follow the giant length

of log to where the tree's limbs began. The size of small trees themselves, they fanned out and soared upward, with foliage so dense and seemingly fresh, it looked like new growth, and I knew what my father would have said: "Even lying down that oak's got a lot of juice left in it."

I came to a place where it looked as though branches had been pulled aside and snapped back to make an entry into the heart of the tree. Bending over, I edged my way in, feeling like a child exploring. Twigs snagged my hair and caught at my clothes. I was glad I was wearing jeans and that my shirt had long sleeves. I shielded my face with my hands.

The path, if it could be called that, ended quickly in a small hollowed-out place where the ground was trampled and littered with broken twigs and tattered leaves. Patches of shifting sunlight filtered in through the overarching leaves and showed up what looked like pieces of colored paper hidden in the debris on the ground. I knelt down and brushed the leaves aside and found a collection of crumpled candy wrappers and a few empty soda cans. I studied them for a long moment and then stood up and looked around. Through an opening in the leaves, I saw that I was directly in line with the front porch of my father's house and the rocker where he had been sitting when he was shot.

With a growing sense of horror, I took in the meaning of that line of vision and my heart began to pound. I spun around, suddenly afraid. A branch whipped across my cheek and I realized the way out was no easier than the way in. With my hand in front of my face to protect my eyes, I almost didn't see it—a yellow bandanna, snagged on a broken limb.

It was years since I had been inside the house next-door. A family named Wheeler had lived there all the time I was growing up. Gil had been two years ahead of me in school and I'd had a crush on him forever. The summer his leg was in a cast we played checkers on a round table by the bay window in his living room. The window was still there, but everything else was different.

"You'll forgive me if I don't get up," Mr. Harrison said with an impish smile, and patted the side of his wheelchair as though it was the flank of a horse. "It's nice of you to come to see me. I was expectin' Alma might, but I guess she's had her hands full. I saw the Rescue Squad the other day. I could tell from the way

they carried your daddy away, he was gone. If it's any comfort, he had a long and good life."

"Thank you. I think he did."

"You know, we weren't what you'd call friends . . . but I'd say we had an understanding. You see, we were in the same boat. Alone. Growing old . . . in houses too big for us, houses we didn't want to leave." He paused and his lips spread into a smile. "And, we had that tree."

I waited, trying not to show how much his words affected me. I knew my father had been lonely, but he had never let on how much.

"We had a good run with that old oak. We started arguing about it right after my wife died . . . that's nine years now. You were gone by then. I don't know how much you knew. . . ."

"Dad told me some, but not all, I'm sure."

"I know what you must have thought . . . a couple of old fools, fightin' over a tree. We were that, all right, but it kept us on our toes and gave us something to think about . . . something to do. Maybe we took it too far." He frowned and leaned forward. "I'm afraid that tree had something to do with your daddy's death."

I stared at the old man, wondering what he meant, waiting for him to go on.

"Tell me what happened to your father," he said. "Come on now, don't be afraid. I have a right to know."

"Alma found him on the porch. She thought he might have had a heart attack."

He nodded impatiently. "But it was something else, wasn't it?"

I hesitated, but remembered what he said. He had a right to know. "My father was shot."

"That's what I thought! That's what I heard—a rifle shot."

I wanted to ask if he had seen anyone, but I waited when I saw that he had more to say.

"You know, it isn't every day a tree like that goes down. If we weren't on this back road here, there would have been a lot of rubbernecks coming to look at that tree. But what I'd been seeing out there was something different. It wasn't somebody standing in the open, gawking, like I saw you doing this morning . . . That's some hole, isn't it? . . . No, what I saw was someone trying hard not to be seen. Somebody hiding out in that tree."

* * *

Alma was in the kitchen when I got back. I'd left a note for her on the hall table, saying I'd gone to visit Mr. Harrison.

"Oh, that poor man! I'd been meanin' to go over and talk to him—he must have seen all the commotion over here—but I just plain forgot. His regular lady Georgene is recuperatin' from an operation, or she would have been over here by now. There's someone from an agency comin' until she gets back on her feet."

Alma had a load of wash she wanted to do, so I left her and started upstairs to call Russell Worth. I was wondering if he had called while I was out, before Alma came. I got his secretary. "I called twice," Mrs. Gaines said. "Mr. Worth has to be in court today, so he's not going to be able to make it to Elkton like he hoped. But he wanted you to know a couple of state police detectives will be at your place at one o'clock. Sheriff Jenkins is supposed to be there too. He doesn't know about the detectives coming. He thinks Mr. Worth needs him to sign some papers."

It was almost twelve-thirty when I hung up the phone and decided I'd better get downstairs. Mrs. Gaines had done her best to be reassuring, "Let those detectives handle things. They'll know what to do." Now I needed to talk to Alma. I wanted to tell her that the sheriff was coming and so were two detectives.

As I turned to leave the room I realized she'd made my bed and picked up my shirt and jeans, which I'd left in a pile on a chair. They were probably already in the wash. Outside in the hall I saw her starting up the stairs. The yellow bandanna was in her hand.

"Miz Katy, where'd you get this? It was in the pocket of your jeans. I'm almost sure it's Rollie's. Those two boys I told you about . . . who ganged up on him a couple of weeks ago . . . they took it from him. He didn't give me a minute's peace, wantin' another one just like it, but I couldn't find one anywhere around here. Them red ones are a dime a dozen, but this here yellow kind is hard to come by."

I stared at the small square of yellow cloth. "Alma, where's Rollie now?"

She looked surprised. "He's back in Chicago with Roland. He left here just two days before your daddy died. That's somethin' else I thanked the Lord for. . . . If Rollie had been here, he'd have been sittin' alongside your daddy . . . and I might have lost him too." Her voice had fallen to a whisper.

I put my arms around her and said my own silent prayer. I hadn't gotten around to telling her that I'd seen the snapshot of Rollie and my father in her room. She had no way of knowing what had gone through my mind when I found that piece of yellow cloth.

The sound of a car horn honking outside gave us both a start.

"Oh, Lord, that's the sheriff! I forgot all about him. He came a few minutes ago, asking to see you. I was on my way up to tell you. You be careful of him, Miz Katy. My son Roland says he's a man with an attitude. I'd call him plain mean. Those boys of his don't have a chance of bein' any different. It was them who roughed up Rollie."

There wasn't time to tell Alma anything now and I was just as glad. There'd be time later and maybe some things wouldn't need to be said at all.

I headed toward the door, calling back over my shoulder, "I think we'll be needing some iced tea."

A wide-brimmed hat shaded the sheriff's face and the kind of sunglasses you can't see into covered his eyes. He was leaning against his car, which was parked in the hot sun. I was surprised to see that his boys were in the backseat.

"You got some kind of trouble out here?" The sheriff's voice was a bellow in the quiet yard.

I had been about to apologize for keeping him waiting, but I dropped the idea. "You seem to have a short memory, Sheriff. My father was shot, remember?"

"I thought it might be something else. I got a message his lawyer wanted me out here. One o'clock. It's almost one now. Is he comin', or isn't he? This is my afternoon off and me and my boys are about to take some recreation."

I glanced at the boys. It had to be an oven in that car. As though reading my mind, and perhaps emboldened by my glance, the younger one called out, "Hey Pa, it's hot in here. Why can't we get out?"

The sheriff spun sideways and brought his fist down on the roof of the car. The boy slumped down.

As I stood wondering what was going to happen next, a car rumbled down the road toward us, a dark sedan stirring dust. It pulled in behind the sheriff's car. Two men in plain clothes stepped out.

The sheriff looked at me. "Is one of them your father's lawyer?"

I didn't have to answer. The taller of the two men spoke up. "We're with the state police. I'm Detective Manning. This here is Detective Sneed. You must be Katherine Cobbs," he said.

I nodded. "And this is Sheriff Jenkins."

"That's right, I'm Sheriff Billie Jenkins. What are you fellas doing out here?"

"We'll get to that," Manning said. "If you don't mind, ma'am, maybe we could go inside and get out of this heat."

"Of course," I said and then looked toward the sheriff's car. "Those boys should come on in too."

"That's right, Sheriff. Bring those boys of yours along. Another few minutes and we'll be having to treat them for heatstroke."

Alma already had a tray with a pitcher of iced tea and glasses set up on a table in the living room when we trooped in. She took charge of the boys and directed them to sit on the wooden bench in front of the fireplace, and gave each of them a tall glass. Their thirsty gulps resounded in the quiet room.

"What's your name, son?" Manning asked the older boy after he had emptied his glass.

"Billie Jenkins."

"Same name as your father?"

The boy nodded and looked down at his feet.

"My name's Jamie," the smaller one piped up.

"And who are you named after?"

Jamie shrugged and looked across the room at his father. "Pa, who am I named after?"

"Your grampa."

"Which grampa?"

"You ask too many questions." The sheriff scowled and looked from one detective to the other. "What brought you fellas out here?"

"Let's say it's a special assignment," Manning answered.

A car skidded to a stop outside. Its doors opened and slammed shut.

The sheriff was on his feet. "What the hell's goin' on here?"

"Take it easy." Manning motioned him to sit down. "It's some of our folks. They've come to have a look around."

"Look around at what?"

"Around the house, and around that tree," the detective answered smoothly. "Whoever shot Mr. Cobbs might have left something behind."

The sheriff had left his hat on the hall table and his sunglasses were in his shirt pocket. His face seemed bare. He gave me a quick sideways glance. "Like I told her . . . her ole man was shot with a twenty-two rifle. It'd be like looking for a needle in the hay trying to find out whose it was."

Manning frowned. "That's one way of looking at it, but it sounds like a lazy man's excuse."

The sheriff stiffened, but something made him let it go.

I had been watching the boys. The older one continued to look at the floor, but Jamie was sitting up straight, his eyes open wide, riveted on Manning. "What are you lookin' for?"

Manning leaned toward him. "That's a good question, Jamie. We look for lots of things. Let's say someone had a flashlight and left it behind. The flashlight would have fingerprints on it, wouldn't it?"

The boy frowned. "I guess so. But it wasn't dark. We didn't need no flashlight. We . . ."

His brother grabbed him. "Shut up, Jamie," he pleaded. "Just shut up." The bench toppled over and the boys rolled onto the floor.

The sheriff started across the room. Manning rose. "Leave them be, Sheriff. They're not hurt."

Confusion showed on the sheriff's face. The boys got to their feet and righted the bench and sat back down.

"Sheriff." My voice wasn't all that loud, but it seemed to startle him. His head snapped around.

"You told me whoever it was had to be a good shot. You're a good shot, aren't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Of course I'm a good shot."

"Pa hits the bull's-eye all the time." Jamie's proud voice filled the room. "Billie's good, too. I'm not so good yet." He lowered his eyes, but only for an instant. "I'd be a lot better if Pa gave me more chances. When just my brother and me go shootin' together, Billie gives me lots of chances. The other day he let me have the first shot. We were gonna shoot out the light on the ole man's porch. I missed it, but I scared the ole man . . . he fell right off his chair. Billie woulda gotten the light for sure, but he didn't take no shot. He grabbed me and said we hadda go."

It was nine o'clock and the night sounds of crickets and tree toads filtered in through the open windows. Alma and I were

sitting across from one another at the kitchen table, tired, but not ready for sleep. I had found a bottle of bourbon on the pantry shelf and had fixed myself a drink. Alma was having a glass of warm milk. We had been talking a long time.

She shook her head. "It's hard to believe so many folks knew so much bad stuff about that sheriff and just turned their heads the other way. Beatin' those boys up whenever he felt like it . . . and then givin' them treats by lettin' them play with guns. . . ."

I didn't understand it either, not in a small town like Elkton. I understood the apathy of a big city, but it seemed wrong here.

Russell Worth had telephoned in the late afternoon, after the police had left. "I'm glad things worked out," he said. "It didn't take but a few calls to get a line on that sheriff. From the bank president on down, everybody said he was a bad apple. The town should be ashamed of itself. They should have run him out. One way to handle a bully is to set him up against a bigger bully. That's what those detectives were supposed to do—bully him. But we were extra lucky that his boys were along. Otherwise it would have been awhile before we got to the bottom of things."

I'd asked him what would happen to the boys.

"They're with their mother now. I understand she's been fighting to have sole custody for a couple of years now. She works here in Raleigh at the bank down the street from my office. It won't be hard for me to look into things."

Across the table from me Alma was nodding, but her eyes flickered open and she lifted her head. "I was just havin' a conversation with your daddy. I don't know if he knew about me dropping them cloves in that Zanzibar chest of his. I suspect he did." Her smile was wistful. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to take some with me when we go to the cemetery tomorrow."

I didn't trust myself to speak. So many times in the last few days I'd been close to tears. I knew if I started, it would be hard to stop.



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BY CELIA FREMLIN

The Hudson Chain

BY EDWARD D. HOCH

When Your Breath Freezes

BY KATHLEEN DOUGHERTY

High Water

BY PATRICK IRELAN

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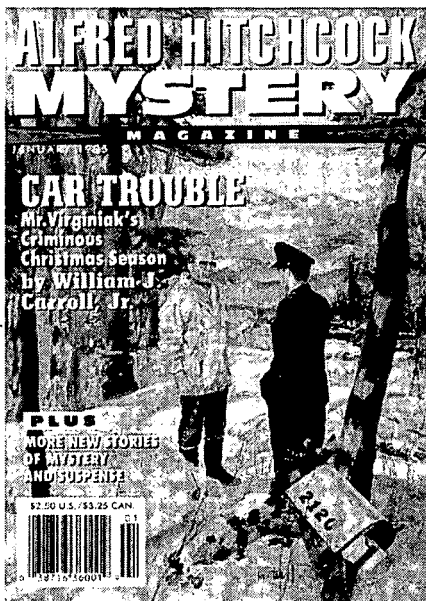
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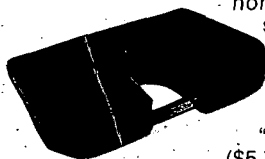
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